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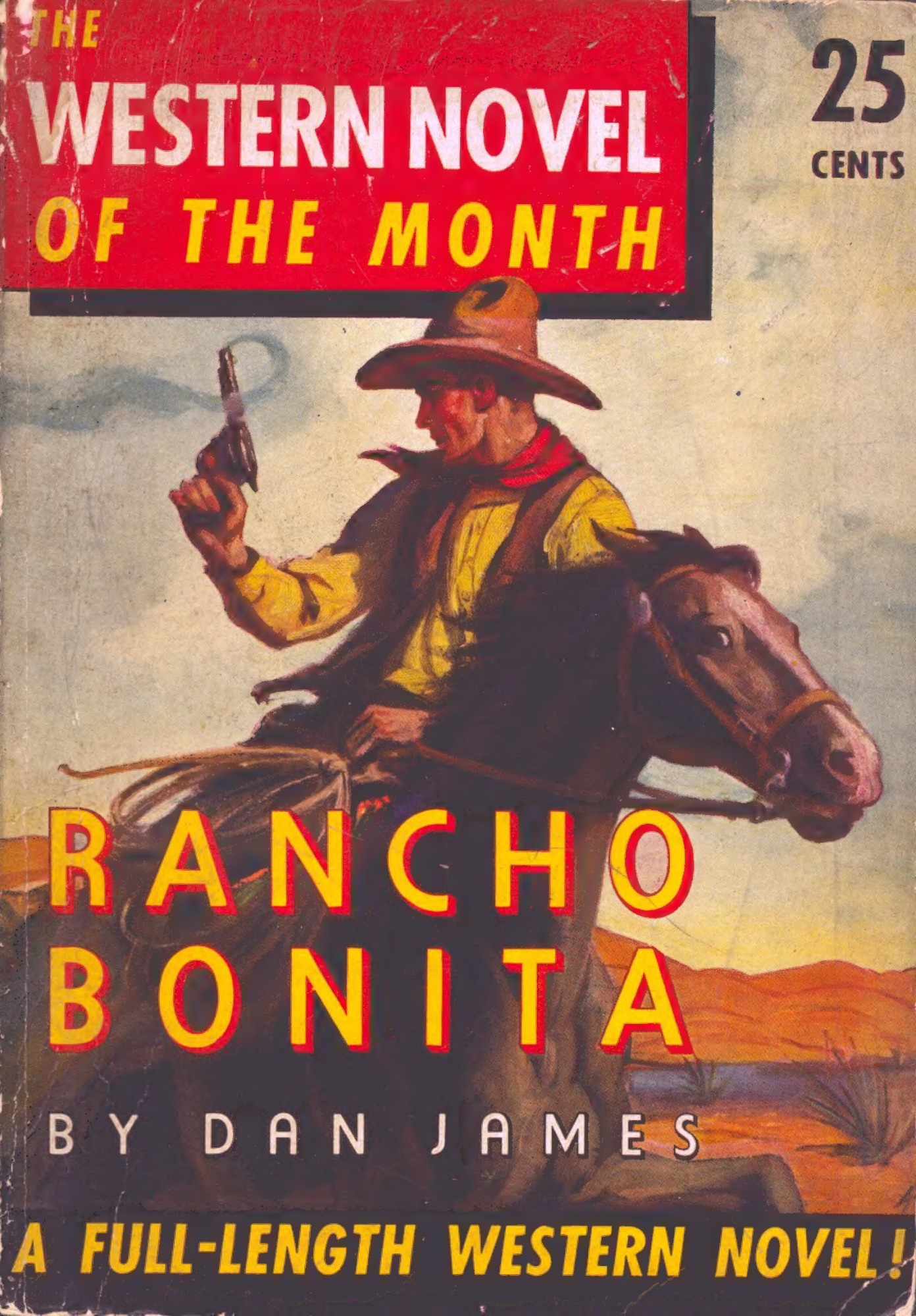

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BY DAN JAMES

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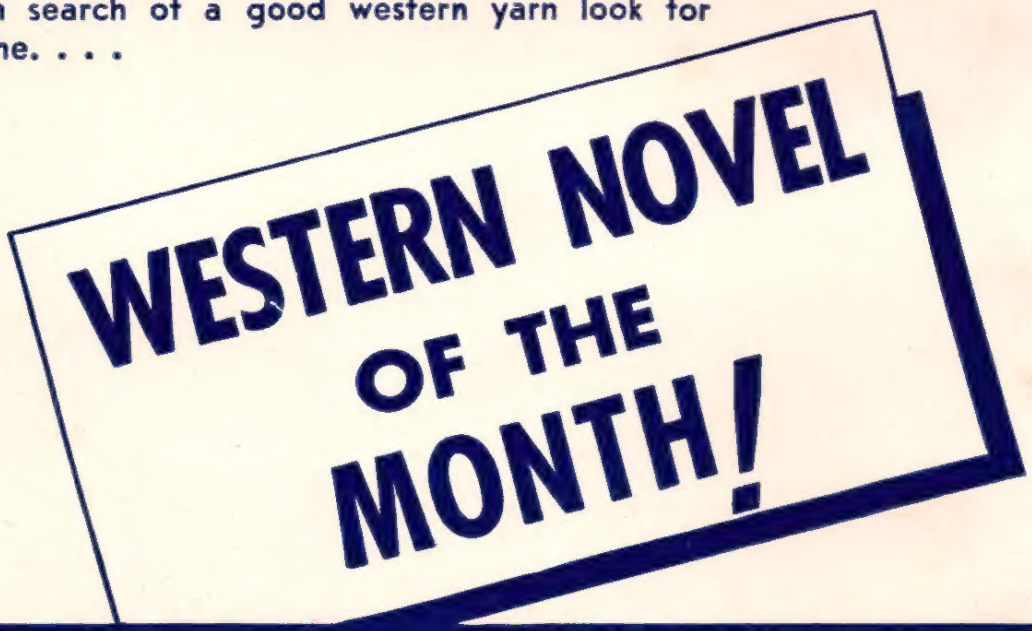

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RANCHO BONITA

By
DAN JAMES

A
WESTERN NOVEL
OF THE MONTH

NEW YORK—1940

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS late afternoon of a summer day in 1849. A vast country of amazing contrasts had changed its national allegiance. A great empire had been taken by the Americans from Santa Ana's blood-stained veterans of the Alamo massacre. The fierce passions and bitter hatred of conquered men still ran hot against the fairer-skinned men from the North who came in ever larger numbers to the deserts and mountains, to grassy valleys and forested highlands of the new-old land.

Two trail dusted riders crossed *Paso del Cielo,* riding toward the falling sun. After the treeless desert they had left that morning, the dark green cloak of cedar, pine and oak which clothed the western slopes and highest ridges of the Sierra Mariposa seemed like the borderland of Paradise. The leading rider came first to a full view of the verdant slopes and green valleys far below. He shouted wildly to the freckled, sandy-haired cowboy back of him.

"Hot skeeter! Look, Jerry, get your eyes full of that. Did you ever see a chunk of Heaven like it?"

Jerry Hope, the sandy-haired cowboy, spurred his roan toward his enthusiastic companion.

"Hush, you brayin' mule!" he warned in a voice of fearful caution. "Ain't you rememberin' what them fellers in Galupa told us 'bout this bein' Apache country?"

Dave Warner, the long, broad-shouldered youth astride the dark, iron-gray horse, having stopped his mount to gaze at the glorious vista laid out before him, removed his broad-brimmed black hat while he grinned at Jerry Hope.

"Better comb that patch of goat hair on your noggin," he told Jerry, "and get them 'Paches to tumble out. They'll be in your ears and eyes next. Look," he waved again at the scene before them, "wouldn't that make you forget Injuns and deserts and—"

"And my scalp?" Jerry asked with a tinge of sarcasm while his eyes roved searchingly about the nearer landscape.

" 'Cording to my figgering, all this country west of here is the Aragon grant," said Dave. "See that little speck of houses and trees 'way down there where that north running valley meets this bigger one straight before us? See 'em? Well, that's Rancho Bonita right

where that Mex in Galupa said it'd be?"

"But he said we'd better not ride past there," Jerry warned. "That Aragon feller don't waste no love on gringos."

"We gotta slope right down that valley if we ever mean to see California," Dave Warner insisted. "But we gotta find a clean crick down this mountain. I want a bath, a good supper and a powerful lot of shut-eye. Let's go."

He guided his horse down the sloping, winding trail from *Paso del Cielo* and broke into an impromptu song as he went, his carefree voice bringing a pained, fearful look upon the freckled features of Jerry Hope.

They rode around the lip of a wooded ridge and saw the white spray from a small waterfall beyond the tops of trees in a canyon below them. They followed the trail where it curved around and downward along the mountain side to the tuneful mountain brook. The clear, cold water leaped and splashed over a thickly strewn bed of rounded rocks which looked like enormous eggs.

Dave Warner dismounted at the edge of the gurgling stream. Cannon Ball, his horse, buried his nose in the crystal waters while Dave leaned with one arm across his saddle and admired the scene. He was a tall youth, twenty-five years of age, with about one hundred and seventy pounds of slender, lithe muscle and bone. Under his not overly long, straight nose, thin, sensitive lips were parted now in a smile of silent pleasure. At each hip a bone-handled .45 hung on a decorated leather belt. The tips of the holsters were tied to his legs with buckskin strings. He wore black, half-knee-length boots, scalloped fore and aft, decorated in Mexican style.

Even Jerry Hope, for all his fear of Apaches, sat in his saddle and admired the entrancing scenery.

When Dave Warner began removing his roll and saddle from Cannon Ball's back, Jerry Hope grumbled his dislike of camping overnight in such an inviting place for an ambush. He finally gave in and dismounted when Dave started to lead his unsaddled horse toward the waterfall.

"I'm gonna give Cannon Ball and me a sousing good bath under them falls," Dave declared. "Come on and get the alkali out of your ears and wash your bronc, too."

"Who's gonna keep watch while we're naked and gunless under them falls?" Jerry demanded gloomily.

"Oh, come on," Dave called back impatiently. "There's no

Apaches in a hundred miles, or them cows wouldn't be grazing so peaceful all over that valley below with no *vaqueros* in sight. Hi!"

He cut off abruptly with a loud cry, snaked his right hand gun with lightning quick movement and fired at a large bird which flapped up noisily out of the bushes just ahead. The big fowl turned over in the air, wings suddenly gone lifeless, and fell heavily to the ground.

"Here's our supper, old grumbler!" young Warner yelled. He pulled Cannon Ball on toward the fallen bird and hefted it with one hand. "A big turkey gobbler and fat as a corn-fed pig."

The next half hour was consumed by the two traveling cowboys in bathing themselves and washing the sweat stains and dust from their grateful horses under the brink of the falls. They had dressed and returned to their saddles after staking the horses out on the lush grass between the timber and the stream. Jerry was gathering wood for the cook fire while Dave started to work with his knife at dressing the turkey for broiling.

He and Jerry Hope had been inseparable partners for a long time before they left southwest Texas and headed for California and the fulfillment of their dreams, but Dave liked to tease his over-cautious, grumbling friend. Without seeming to, he was as constantly, perhaps more alertly, on watch for danger than was Jerry Hope.

It was this constant watchfulness which gave him a glimpse of a noiseless figure coming through the timber beyond the stream. Jerry Hope saw the moving form a second after Dave and gave a cry of warning from the bushes where he was gathering sticks.

"Jump, Dave!" he shouted. "I see a Injun sneakin' through them woods 'crost the crick! Run!"

At the very first glimpse of the moving form, Dave's hand went instinctively for his gun as he dropped turkey and knife. Then he relaxed and stood up. An old brown-skinned woman came out of the bushes and unhesitatingly approached him. She was a full-blooded Indian, but dressed in the manner of a peon woman. A cloth covering her head and shoulders was tied under her sharp chin, leaving only the oval of her wrinkled, leathery face visible. Deeply sunken, piercingly black eyes bore upon Dave Warner unwaveringly as she came across the stones of the water course and stood before him.

"Why white man come? Where go?" she demanded in a quaking, hoarse voice. Dave wondered if she was a dried mummy of a by-

gone age come down from nearby cliff-dweller ruins.

"Hi, *abuelita,*" he greeted her in Spanish, smiling, and extended to her a hand which she took in a weak, listless clasp. "We ride to California, the land of paradise and much riches. Where do you live, little grandmother?"

Her wizened old face lighted up.

"You speak Spanish well, young man," she said, "but you look like *Americano.* Maybe you come to my *choza,* my little *casita* back there," she motioned toward the timber from which she had come, "and talk. I have had a vision and I must tell you."

She turned her face to gaze down through the open space made by the stream, watching something she could discern far below the foot of the mountain. A small moving object, barely recognizable as a horse and rider, became visible to Dave Warner down there when he followed her gaze. That rider was coming unmistakably up the *Paso del Cielo* trail and must pass this very spot. Dave started to speak, to ask if the old woman knew who it was. She silenced him with a vehement gesture of her bony, withered hand.

After some time she turned her black eyes upon him and he shivered, for there was a strangely different, ghostly stare in those little black orbs, as if the woman were seeing into another world.

"Come," she told Dave. "Leave your friend with the horses and come to my *casita.* I must talk to you about she who comes now from Rancho Bonita. I shall tell you much which you do not know."

"*Abuelita,* you speak of the rider down there as if you knew it is a woman. How do you know that?"

"She comes to Conchita with food and for a vision into the days and years that are to come. Conchita knows those who come to her *casita.* You come with me and you shall hear what Conchita tells you."

"A fortune-teller, huh?" Dave questioned, skeptical.

"She spooks me, Dave," Jerry wailed. "Let's git outa here!"

"Okay, *abuelita,*" Dave Warner waved a hand toward the timber whence the old woman had come, "I'll go to your house and listen. Lead on."

Jerry Hope groaned his misery and mumbled futile curses as the aged hag led Dave across the stones of the stream.

Hidden back of a thick grove of cedars, the old woman's *choza* was a little one-room stone structure, built like a Mexican adobe. Its floor was the hard-packed earth, but the whole of the interior was clean and neatly kept. A pot of beans, suspended from hooks, sim-

mered over low-blazing coals in a fireplace at the back end, disseminating a fragrance which enticed Dave's appetite.

A bony, brown hand waved young Warner to a hide-bottomed chair near the open door. He sat down where the red rays of the sun splashed across his shoulders and brought red tints to his dark brown hair. The Indian woman sat down before him on a blanket, crossing her legs like a praying Buddha. Her piercing black eyes stared for a few seconds at the buckle on Dave's belt, then the intentness of the stare faded and a far-off clairvoyancy shone from them.

She began moving her lips in her sunken, toothless mouth, silently at first, then an unintelligible murmur came from her vocal chords, sounding as if a voice spoke from a great distance. Dave Warner looked around the small room at first, eerily aware of the voice, but unconvinced at first that it emerged from the old woman's moving lips. Then intelligible words broke forth upon his startled ears, words in clear, educated Spanish.

"You are a brave young man," the ghostly voice proclaimed in a monotone. "The sun of good fortune shines brightly all around you. I have brought you here from far away so that you may find your happiness and the riches you seek. A young woman who is more beautiful than morning flowers awaits you in the valley. She comes now for you to look upon her. You will love her with the madness of the young and reckless.

"I see the firemakers and throwers of thunderbolts in your hands casting much lightning at the enemies who surround you and your beloved. You go with the speed of light straight for those enemies. They seek your life with all the power and cunning of the great Evil One. To defeat them you must be more than brave as you are; you must be cunning and ruthless as they are; you must use your mind, your eyes and all the strength of your body.

"You will go to Rancho Bonita. There you will find an evil man and a very weak, foolish man. The evil man has power over the weak one and directs the weak one to great wickedness against the one for whom you shall walk through the flames of hell. Go now and do my commands. She whom you shall love with madness is very near to you now. It is done."

For a moment the old woman remained motionless. Her staring, unseeing eyes gradually took on a livelier expression and finally moved upward from his belt buckle to look questioningly into his dubious face. She was normal again and the spell was gone. Dave

Warner suddenly laughed, a skeptical, mirthful laugh.

"Well, *abuelita,*" he said, "that was good while it lasted. But you're all wrong. Me and my pardner's headed for California. I'm not stopping to fight no gal's battles for her like them old-time knights in armor, and the woman don't live that I'd go so locoed over like you said. Here's a dollar to buy more of them good-smelling beans you're cooking. *Adiosita,* little grandmother."

He stood up, holding the silver coin down to her. She did not move to take it, but shook her head slowly in refusal. Her dark eyes gleamed with resentment before she turned them from his laughing face to glance up at the open doorway behind him. He suddenly became aware of another person standing there against the doorfacing and whirled, on guard.

A young woman stood there, looking at him with harsh contempt. For long seconds Dave Warner stood as if transfixed, his startled, unbelieving eyes feasting upon the most entrancing, thrilling beauty he had ever seen. The girl's cold hauteur at the moment passed him by. Only when his gaze met the flashing, cold anger in those brilliantly black eyes and read the contempt there did he recover his senses, shocked.

A white lace mantilla draped over her glossy black cloud of hair like a shower of snow, fell in waving folds over her shapely, erect shoulders. She wore a black velvet riding dress, with snowy white trimming about the low-necked collar, matching the milky whiteness of her full throat.

"Well, *Americano,*" she finally spoke in excellent English, "now that you have so shamelessly admitted your cowardice, will you please go? I wish to see Conchita alone."

CHAPTER TWO

In his painful embarrassment, Dave Warner still remained gaping at the beautiful girl. He understood her command to go, guessed that she had heard Conchita's words and his own skeptical reaction, but his feet refused to take him away. He suddenly realized a wild desire to know this girl. A wish flamed within him to tell her that she was the loveliest being he had ever expected to see this side of Heaven.

He stepped over the door sill and faced her more closely in the glow of the setting sun.

"Please, Miss," he said warmly holding his big black hat with both fumbling hands in front of him, "let me tell you that if you was the girl in that cock-and-bull story the old lady was telling me, I'd be for staying here and riding hell-for-leather in cleaning them lobos out of your way. I just wish the old wonman's story was true and you was the girl in trouble. Do you live here?"

"I am Raquel de Aragon," she said, still scornful, "and I live at Rancho Bonita, down the valley, a place where wandering careless *Americanos* had much better not go, especially when they are as fearful of trouble as you."

"Great good gosh, Miss Raquel!" he exclaimed, red in the face now with understanding, believing for the first time that this girl was she with whom the old woman's story dealt. "I sure didn't think you was the girl the old lady talked about. Was that yarn of hers all true?"

"What possible reason can you have for asking me such personal questions?" she asked with a flash of anger in her eyes.

"Because if you are, I'll show you I'm not the coward you just called me, Miss Raquel de Aragon," he replied with a rising show of heat in his own manner. "I thought the old squaw was a little batty in the head, but if the tall yarn is true, just let me and my pardner yonder," he nodded toward the frantically gesturing Jerry Hope, "show you that your despised *Americanos* can sling the lightning and thunder the old woman talked about."

There was an audible groan then from behind the cedar trees. Raquel de Aragon looked quickly around and saw Jerry Hope with his hands to his head in a posture of uttermost despair.

"Your friend seems very unenthusiastic about your generous offer to help me," she commented. She looked at Dave Warner with cool deliberation, appraising his physical endowments as a horse trader looks over an animal for which he bargains, then her lively dark eyes met his hungrily staring gray ones and her face quickly flooded with color. "You are—"

She dropped her glance to the ground, apparently flustered out of her former cold calm, unable to say what she had begun. He saw the long, curving sweep of her dark lashes above the fair cheek and his heart thumped like a run-away wagon on rough stones.

"I am what, Miss Raquel?" he begged. "Do I pass inspection? I'm Dave Warner and my pardner yonder is Jerry Hope. We're from Texas and we've plumb forgot all about California. We'll stay right here and die fighting for you if you need us. We'd be mighty glad—"

"Oh-h-h!" Jerry Hope wailed from the cedar brake. "You dumb peck o' chokeberry sap! Come on! Our turkey's burnin' over the fire. Come on while you got a chance to!"

Both Dave and Raquel de Aragon looked toward the screening cedars and saw Jerry Hope stagger away and disappear, his arms waving over his head in maneuvers of hopelessness.

"I am afraid for you, Dave Warner," the girl said, an honest light of fear in her eyes then. "Your friend doesn't agree with you and you alone could not help. Not ten, or even twenty like you could help me. It is terrible—much worse than you can imagine from what Conchita told you. Oh, it is foolish for me to stand here and speak of my troubles to you, a total stranger. Let me talk to Conchita and learn why she told you that story."

"All right, Miss Raquel," he agreed, "but please don't call me a total stranger any more. From here out, I'm your friend and I'll prove it. Don't think that Jerry Hope will renig. He's plenty cautious, but once he smells gunpowder he's a galloping, fighting fool. Tell me before I go how I can help. What's the lay?"

She looked at him questioningly, a lingering doubt in her dark eyes, but there was also in her manner a show of anxiety not to offend him, or refuse his offer without good reason.

"May I talk with Conchita alone for a few minutes?" she asked him. "She is a very wise and very dear old friend. If she says that I may accept your help, I will do so most gratefully. Will you wait?"

"You'd have to call a whole army to run me away, Miss Raquel,"

he told her fervently. "I'll stick around outside where I won't hear your private talk. Go ahead."

Dave walked away toward the cedars. He was in a trance, walking on the clouds far above the earth. The vision of Raquel de Aragon was filling his mental vision.

At last the girl stepped through the cabin door into the light of the setting sun and looked about for him. He was hurrying down to her at once. He stood before her, but she did not look into his face as he wanted. Her gaze was turned away from him, down toward the trees on the lower slope and there was fear and deep worry in her expression.

Dave turned his head quickly and saw two men walking toward the cabin from the trees and high rocks just below. Their approach had been stealthy, the timber hiding them until they were twenty steps away.

"Uncle Alfredo de Aragon and Pancho Torres!" Raquel whispered in alarm. "They have followed me. You must leave quickly! They might kill you, they hate Americans so, especially if—"

She cut off her hasty warning speech as the two men came so near they could see her speaking to the young man towering over her.

There was no need for him to be told which was the Castilian aristocrat, Alfredo de Aragon, and which was Pancho Torres. De Aragon was a little man with squinting eyes, graying black hair, a large, long nose and weak, receding chin. He affected a thin caricature of a moustache and goatee. His eyes were small and black, set close to his big nose. They gleamed with an unholy, fanatical hatred at Dave Warner.

Francisco Torres overshadowed his smaller companion like a towering oak above an aspen sapling. He was well over six feet tall, big-boned, square-faced, with powerful, blunt hands and a body that was not fat, but full and powerful as a hippopotamus. He wore a heavy, untrained and untrimmed black moustache. His hair was coarse and a dusty black, confirming the Indian blood of his dark, mestizo complexion.

Torres wore a heavy gun at his right hip, with a sheathed, long knife a little nearer the front of his wide leather belt. Alfredo de Aragon had a smaller-calibered gun in a neat, decorated holster at his left side, slung for a right-handed draw. Both men surveyed Dave Warner's body from head to foot as they approached, their eyes hesitating at sight of his two blackhandled .45's, those new and deadly

six-shot cap-and-ball revolvers of Colonel Sam Colt.

De Aragon turned his flashing glance of hatred from the young American and looked severely at his niece while he spoke.

"Why have you come here again without my permission?" de Aragon demanded of the girl. "Did you come to meet this gringo?"

"I came to bring Conchita food," Raquel answered with a proud display of spirit, looking steadily into her uncle's face. "It is something we owe her after the years of service to our family. I shall continue to do so, for it was my father's wish that we care for her."

"If she will not come to live nearer the *hacienda,*" Alfredo de Aragon declared angrily, "you shall not come here again, even if the old woman starves. You have not answered my question about this gringo. You came to meet him here?"

"He is an American gentleman and he understands Spanish, my dear uncle," she retorted with cool dignity. "Is it not the custom of our family to treat friendly strangers with courtesy?"

"Friendly strangers!" de Aragon exclaimed, turning his blazing glance again upon Dave Warner. "These gringos come and steal half of our fatherland and you call them friendly! You dare to call the robbers gentlemen! She evades my question very carefully, gringo!" he continued, speaking directly to Dave. "You will answer it. Why did you sneak in here to meet my niece? I am Don Alfredo de Aragon, master of Rancho Bonita and all the great Aragon grant which extends much farther than you can see from these mountain tops. Answer me!"

"Don Alfredo," Dave answered him calmly, "I don't generally answer questions put to me in that fashion, but for the young lady's sake, I'll say that I never had the honor to see her before a few minutes ago and I sure aim to see her again, if she'll let me, whether you like it or not."

"Gringo dog!" de Aragon cried furiously. "You dare to speak to me that way! I will have you taken and whipped until you show respect to the Aragon name!"

Dave thought again now of the stories he had heard in Galupa about this black sheep scion of the Aragons, last surviving man of the family.

"I would show much greater respect to the Aragon name than you have shown all your worthless life, little fumbling gambler!" he replied without raising his voice.

Alfredo de Aragon swelled, speechless for the moment, and his

funny, misshapen face turned purplish with his rage. He looked fitfully from Dave to Raquel de Aragon while he held his breath. Then he exploded toward his niece.

"You have dared to tell those lies to a stranger!" he cried, his small right hand shaking before his middle as if he had half a mind to draw his gun, then he turned in frantic appeal to the silent, dark-faced big man behind him. "You, Francisco! Take the gringo goat! Cut his throat with your knife so he may never again insult us! No, take him back to the *hacienda* and we shall feed him to this dishonoring girl's pet panther!"

But Francisco Torres was not so foolish as Alfredo de Aragon asked him to be. It was not his method to attack an armed and plainly very dangerous man from the front after full warning. He smiled with a sly expression in his eyes.

"Perhaps it is much better, Don Alfredo," he advised, "to merely send the gringo on his way with a warning to all gringos to stay far away from this country. If he is foolish and comes like a fly into the spider's web later, we shall have all the more reason to enjoy what we shall do to him. Let's finish this babble and take the girl back to Rancho Bonita. Come Raquel. It is too bad that you cannot invite your new gringo friend to our wedding that is soon to be."

He leered at Dave Warner with a twisted grin, enjoying the look of amazement which spread over the youth's face. He held out his hand for the girl's arm. She evaded him and ran around her uncle and Torres, going toward the slope and the trees where their horses were evidently tied out. As she went behind the bulking form of Pancho Torres she cast one swift, fearful glance into the steadily watching eyes of Dave Warner. What she would convey to him by that appealing flash of her dark, lustrous eyes he could not guess, but he gave her a short nod that might have been interpreted as a goodbye gesture by the two men who saw it.

"Gringo!" Alfredo de Aragon warned hoarsely, drawing himself up to his utmost small height, "get off Aragon land at once. If you are found upon it later, I shall show you no mercy."

Pancho Torres waited until the girl and her uncle were out of sight, then after one dark, inscrutable exchange of glances with the silent, motionless young American, he turned and walked away without one backward look.

When the clinking of hoofs on the stony trail below had died away, Jerry Hope ran out of the woods from the spot where the de-

parting trio of horses had been hitched.

"They've gone, Dave!" he cried. "I heard durn near ever'thing they said to you. Boy, let's skip from this damn' country fast as hoss legs can tote us. We can cut 'round north, back o' this range and hit the Colorado below the big gorge and be in California 'fore these here devils change their minds and come after us!"

He came on as he spoke and stopped, breathless, before Dave.

"Nonk-unh, pardner," Dave Warner contradicted, shaking his head slowly while his eyes, now soft and wistful, gazed toward the lower country where Raquel de Aragon was riding away, "we're not going to California—at least, not me. You can go on if you gotta, but me—I'm gonna bust right into Rancho Bonita tonight and talk some more to the most beautiful girl that ever walked her pretty feet over this rocky old earth!"

CHAPTER THREE

FOR A SPACE of several seconds after Jerry Hope heard that startling statement from his tall, dreamy-eyed friend, the freckle-faced cowboy stood agape and speechless, gazing at Dave Warner with an expression of pained incredulity.

"D-D-Dave," he finally gulped out, "you gone sick in the head, or somethin'? You mean you sure 'nough gone locoed over that gal, locoed 'nough to git kilt for her, jest 'cause she said you was skairt to fight? She was jest a-eggin' you on. Don't do it, Dave!"

Dave Warner was still gazing down toward the valley. Three riders had come out into sight down there now, so far away that they seemed mere specks on the winding thread of trail which led to Rancho Bonita.

"Devils who can do mean things to such a girl oughta be blasted offa the face of the earth," he murmured. "Didn't you hear 'em the way they talked to her, Jerry? Did you hear that greasy skunk, Torres, say he was gonna marry her soon, and d'you see the way he looked at her and acted just like she was already his? God! To think such dirty paws as his should ever touch her!"

He lifted his hands to fumble in the large lower front pockets of his leather vest. There was a bulge at the bottom of each pocket. He lifted out two metal, round objects and looked at them. They were extra cap-and-ball breech pieces for his .45's, ready loaded with six balls each. It would take but a few seconds to remove empty cylinders from his guns and slip these into place for deadly work.

"Two more in my saddle bags," he said, fingering the round, heavy little pieces of steel, "and you got four extras, too, Jerry. Thirty-six shots apiece for us in a fight where we'd not have time to reload. We oughta make 'em count for at least fifty stinking lobos that think they can shuffle a sweet girl around like they do beef cattle."

"Oh-h-h!" Jerry Hope moaned. "I oughta knowed better'n to leave Texas with such a trouble-huntin' fool! I oughta knowed we'd never see them green grass hills o' California and pick them oranges so peacefully like you said we'd do."

"I knew you wouldn't vamoose and leave me to fight 'em alone, Jerry!" Dave Warner exclaimed with greater animation, grasping the

sandy-haired, gangling cowboy by the shoulders. "Let's see what Conchita can tell us."

He faced about and looked into the old Indian woman's darkening cabin. She was busying herself, putting away the things Raquel de Aragon had brought her.

"Abuelita," Dave called to her.

She stacked some last items on shelves in the corner and turned back to look at Dave.

"Tell us, *abuelita,"* he begged, "all the dirty story back of the señorita's troubles, and how we can help her. What are they doing to her?"

The old woman quit her work and came to sit again on her blanket while the two young Texans sat before her to listen.

"Her father," the old woman began, "was Don Frederico de Aragon, oldest son of his father. I was young when Don Frederico's father died and left him master of Rancho Bonita and all the Aragon lands and cattle. He gave Don Alfredo, his younger brother, much money and cattle for his share. Don Alfredo gambled and he was soon very poor. Don Frederico married and my little angel the Señorita Raquel, was born. Four years ago they sent the señorita away to your American schools and two years ago, when Don Frederico and the Doña Carlota came on their way from Los Angeles, the wicked Apaches killed them and all but one of their guarding *vaqueros.*

"Don Alfredo then came from the cities where he had liked to live and gamble. He became master of Rancho Bonita until our señorita shall become a woman and marry, which is the law of the country. He gambled with the accursed Pancho Torres, whom you saw with him today, and lost much over the cards. Pancho Torres is a great bandido, with many wicked men to kill and rob for him. Don Alfredo fears Pancho and must pay his debts. He has promised that the señorita shall marry Pancho for his debts. The señorita refused. Don Alfredo was very, very angry. He swore a great oath today that the señorita shall marry the first stranger who comes through the front gate of Rancho Bonita after dark tomorrow evening if she will not marry Pancho Torres. He thinks to force her to do his command and marry the wicked Pancho."

"But how can he do that?" Dave Warner asked, thoroughly agitated. "He can't make her marry against her will. This is American territory now and the American law rules here."

"Your American law is three days away where the soldiers stay," Conchita replied, "and a messenger who went there for Raquelita never returned. Don Alfredo is the law here and has the power to force her," she went on sadly, watching Dave's face with a strangely studious gaze. "He will send for the priest who must do his bidding and pronounce the wedding ceremony. The señorita is helpless. It is because Pancho Torres in his evil cunning wishes the señorita to be glad for him to be her husband that they have planned a very wicked way to make her go gladly into Pancho's arms. When the stranger comes to the gate tomorrow night from Correlitos, twenty miles south of here, he will be the ugliest, most terrible of all Pancho's *bandidos*.

"When my helpless little Raquel looks upon him, she will be glad to take the less horrible Pancho. My little grandson heard them planning the wicked thing and told the señorita. That is why she came today to her old Conchita."

"Then I'm going to ride through that front gate of Rancho Bonita tomorrow night and claim her," David cried, arising, his eyes alight.

"But they would never let you enter," Conchita declared, "because they expect the ugly man for whom they have sent a messenger. Only to him will they open the gate. If you go there and they see who you are, they would kill you from behind the high walls of the *rancho.*"

"Then tell me," he begged, "how we can find that ugly hombre that's supposed to ride into the gate tomorrow night."

"My little star of Heaven, Raquel, did not tell me," the old woman replied. "I cannot tell you who he is. All I know is that if he gets into the gate of Rancho Bonita tomorrow night my little Raquelita will be lost."

She moaned and spread her wispy, wrinkled old hands in a motion of helplessness.

"Come on, pardner," said Dave.

He started out the doorway, shoving Jerry along ahead of him, then stopped and turned back to the old seeress. He asked Conchita to describe the layout of the houses at Rancho Bonita, how he could get into the walled yard and find Raquel's room in the darkness of midnight. The old woman squatted her dried-up figure on the dirt floor and traced with her bony forefinger as she minutely described the fortress-like place.

"Thanks, *abuelita,*" said Dave. "You've told us plenty. Don't worry none about your little Raquelita. I'll see her, come midnight

tonight, then we'll be riding for that ugly hombre that thinks he'll ride in for his bride tomorrow night. Maybe it'll look like him riding in there, too, at Rancho Bonita, but maybe it won't be him. Adiosita, little grandmother."

He waved a hand at the stooping old woman in the growing dusk of evening as he hurried away toward the cedar grove. Jerry Hope stalked along after him, finding a lot of fearful things to grumble about as he went, but Dave Warner seemed not to hear him, going swiftly ahead in silence.

Rancho Bonita's great house should be but two or three miles ahead. The horses had been brought down to a fast walk in order that a better watch could be kept ahead and to right and left. Dave felt certain that Pancho Torres would be sending out an ambushing party to bushwhack him and Jerry. He was gazing into the dark gray distance ahead when his horse suddenly lifted his head with a jerking movement and snorted, his ears pointing forward.

"Quick!" Dave called back to Jerry Hope. "Into them trees!"

He touched spurs lightly to his mount's tender flanks and guided him at a jump and run for the screening cloak of trees and bushes along the river banks. Jerry Hope followed without questioning until they were both well within the dark shadows of the trees, screened from the open prairie and trail by the leafy bushes.

"What'n thunder struck you?" Jerry then asked Dave, nudging his horse up beside his friend's horse.

"Let's get down and hold our broncs' noses—don't let 'em give a whucker," Dave advised and dropped to the ground. "Old Cannon Ball here saw or heard something up ahead. Listen!"

Faintly, then, and growing louder with each short breath from the listening youths, came the sound of running horse feet. The noise grew into a small, unceasing thunder until the anxious watchers, peering out under the tree limbs, could see a group of perhaps a dozen riders dashing along the trail they had just left, going back toward the mountains.

"That big hulk of a buzzard in front sure must be old Pancho, himself," Dave Warner murmured. "He's out to get a try at our throats with that long knife of his."

"Maybe he'd jest like to take us alive for that panther to tear up," Jerry offered consolingly.

"Let's skip along to the Rancho, 'fore them skunks find we've come

this way and trap us at the wall," Dave said and vaulted into his saddle.

"Unh-hunh," Jerry grunted doubtfully, but rode on without further useless argument. He had about resigned himself to the inevitable, knowing Dave Warner as he did.

They came to a bend in the river and saw a bunch of darker shadows down ahead and off to the left of the river.

"That's the ranch houses," Dave warned. "Let's walk our broncs real slow until we get close, then I'll hoof it on in alone."

"Aw, naw, you won't," Jerry countered with emphasis. "We'll eat this huckleberry pie together, 'cause I wanta be on hand when you do your last kickin'. I'll ride to that wall with you and have the broncs right there waitin' for you."

"Okay, pard," Dave agreed. "I knew you'd be sticking in the molasses with me when the jumping-off time came. Guess it'd be better to have the broncs close, but they're liable to whucker and give us away. Maybe we better get down soon and lead 'em up to that wall."

Jerry agreed to that cautious suggestion. They came within two hundred yards or so of the now definitely limned houses and trees and then slipped easily to the ground. Dave led the way toward the eastern side of the high wall which totally surrounded the main house and what apparently were adobe peon quarters in the rear, enclosing what seemed from this half view of the place to be two or three acres of ground.

Fifty yards east of the high wall was a cluster of corrals. Dave was wondering if there were horses in those corrals that would whinney at the approach of his and Jerry's mounts and thereby give warning to a night watchman. While this fear was in his mind a dog howled and barked inside the ranch compound.

Walking the horses very slowly for the last fifty yards, the two young Texans moved up along the eastern wall where Dave had figured from the old woman's directions that he would find a tree overtopping the wall. The enclosure was all shut off from view except the top of the main house as they came to the twelve foot wall. This was apparently built of mountain stones and plastered over. The plaster had fallen away in places, leaving niches in the bare rocks.

The dog's keen ears had evidently heard the soft thump of the two horses' feet, for it kept up an incessant barking now. Another dog, aroused from its sleep, yelped once in a while. When Dave found

the dim outlines of the tree top described by Conchita, he led Cannon Ball close beside the wall underneath, Jerry following until the two horses stood side by side.

"Let's wait a few minutes and see if that dog'll let up," Dave advised, standing at his horse's head.

After a minute or two the dog did stop its barking when no more sound of stirring outside animals disturbed it. Dave was about ready to climb aboard Cannon Ball to reach for the wall top when a murmur of a voice back where the dog had barked fell upon his ears. It seemed that some one was speaking to the dog.

The clank of steel on steel came from a hundred yards away in the rear of the house, at what must have been the north wall of the squared enclosure.

"We better get goin'," Jerry whispered to Dave. "Some one's comin' out the back gate to see what's up!"

"Hold the horses—keep 'em from whuckering," Dave ordered. "I'll skin back to that corner of the wall and try to head 'em off!"

Stepping rapidly on his boot toes, Dave reached the corner, drawing his right-hand gun as he rushed along. At the corner he halted and peeked around. He could distinguish the form of a man standing twenty feet away, looking out across the prairie, then the fellow turned facing him and came forward.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAVE WAITED with the heavy gun gripped, club-wise, in his right hand.

The man came on toward the corner, still looking in every direction with each slow step he took. Dave, holding his hat in left hand, watched the suspicious fellow with one eye around the sharp wall corner. When within three or four feet of the corner, the man looked intently straight toward the scarcely visible edge of Dave's face. He paused for a second, then suddenly leaped to the left as if to circle around farther from the corner and get a full view.

Dave saw a movement of the man's hand that seemed to spell the draw of gun or knife from his belt. The tensed youth leaped one shaved second after the alarmed man sprang away from the wall. A short, startled cry broke from the fellow's lips as a knife slashed upward and then cross-wise at Dave Warner.

The swiftly moving young Texan fended the vicious knife with his big hat in left hand, slapping downward at it while he brought the heavy gun in his right hand smashing upon the terrified man's head. There was a quick, short groan, then the night watchman of Rancho Bonita sank heavily to the ground and lay motionless.

Working with feverish haste, Dave almost denuded the unconscious figure of his scanty clothing in order to gag and tie him, hand and foot. Dave left him and hastened back to Jerry and the horses.

While he was still whispering the last words about his short tussle, Dave started to climb upon Cannon Ball for a try at the top of the wall.

"You reckon they're all asleep inside?" Jerry asked, fearful.

"I'll have to risk it. Them other devils will be sloping back here 'fore long. If you hear them coming in, lead the horses quick out around them cattle pens over east there. If you're not here when I drop over the wall, I'll look for you out there."

"And look out for that panther," Jerry warned. "He might nib you if the dogs don't."

Dave stood in his saddle, caught the top of the wall and drew himself up noiselessly under the darker shadows of the tree limbs which hung above the wall. He moved with as much haste as he dared, fearing the arrival of bright moonlight before he could find Raquel de

Aragon and get the information he needed. It was too dark under the heavy foliage of the tree for him to see the limbs and the trunk. He had to feel around until he found a limb that seemed large and strong enough to bear his weight without too much noisy shaking.

He swung out under the limb and then dropped to the ground.

Dave found the narrow, but tall, iron-barred window in the ground floor of the house where old Conchita's crude, but efficiently made map had placed it for him. He listened for some time with his ears close to the window. There was no glass or wooden shutters inside the three inch spaced bars. He felt a chill of apprehension as he thought of how easily any one, inside that big room, could shoot him or run him through with a knife or sword while he climbed, but he hesitated only a moment before he started up.

He first stood on the low window sill, clasping hold of the upright bars. Cross bars, welded into the uprights, were spaced about every six inches. It was child's play to reach the top of the six-foot window. There he found a two-inch niche in the plastered stone wall extending out over the top edge of the window, then bare, smooth wall above. Only after his head was above that narrow little ledge over the window could he see the dim outlines of another similar window above him and still a few feet out of reach.

With his hands on the narrow ledge above the lower window, he strained to lift himself, bringing his booted feet up to the last topmost cross bar on the window. Slowly, with infinite care to keep from toppling backwards to the ground, he raised his bent body upwards, left hand still on the ledge, right hand feeling along the wall for the sill of Raquel's window.

Slowly he pulled himself up to stand on the narrow ledge over the lower window. His head and shoulders emerged above the sill of the upper window, his hands still resting on that sill. He was on the verge of lifting a hand to grasp a higher hold on the bars of that window when his keen ears, attuned now to the smallest sounds, listening for such a faint sound as a sleeper's breathing within the room, heard a strangely faint, muffled movement inside the window.

Instinctively, without conscious thought directing his act, he dropped head and shoulders back below the sill, but kept his eyes on the darkly invisible depths of the room through the bars. There was a vicious snarl and whine immediately at the bars. Indistinctly Dave saw a furry snout and rounded feline head dash against the bars a few inches away and felt the fetid hot breath of the man-eating mountain

lion gush against his face. Glowing dark green eyes glared at him.

Cautiously the fearful young man started to lift his head above the sill again to call Racquel's name. As he did so, the watchful panther, eyes gleaming like balls of greenish yellow fire, lunged against the metal bars snarling more loudly and viciously than before. A clawing paw shot through between the bars and swiped at Dave's left hand. His instinctive reaction was as quick as the panther's flicking paw and he drew his hand away a bare half second before it would have been dangerously lacerated.

A feminine voice sounded within the room then, coming swiftly nearer to the window as it spoke words of fear and inquiry.

"Panterito! Que haces? Que—. Oh!"

Dave saw the white-gowned figure rush in above the furious panther, recognized Raquel's frightened voice and saw her white face as she peered through the bars at him.

"Who are you? What are you doing there?" she asked in rapid Spanish, putting a quieting hand upon the whining beast's head.

"Raquel!" he whispered. "It's me—Dave Warner from Texas. I've got to ask you something quick—something you didn't have time to tell me today in the mountains!"

"Oh, Santa Maria! Why did you come here?" she cried low, an agony of fear quivering in her voice. "They will kill you! Move your hands over to the end of the window sill," she directed, "so I can open the window for you."

He moved his hands over to the left end of the sill as she commanded, but spoke his fears as he did so.

"The panther! Can you keep him from tearing at me?"

"Panterito won't hurt you now," she assured him as she slipped the hook lock which held the iron bars fast. "He will be your friend if I ask him."

She shoved the brace of bars outward to swing on rusty hinges at the back.

"He knows now that you're my friend and that is enough for him," Raquel told Dave, giving him her small, warm hand to help him climb up inside, "but there is worse danger than panthers around here for you, big Tejano. How in the world did you know where to find me?"

"Conchita told me," Dave informed her. "It was she that told me how to find your room. I tried to get her to tell me who that ugly lobo is that's to come tomorrow night and claim you for his wife to

scare you into marrying this Torres devil. She didn't know who he was."

He had again taken her hands. Their softness and warmth sent exquisite thrills racing through him. She turned her hands in his to return his clasp. He felt a tremor of her arms.

"You cannot help me," she went on. "You must leave here. I can't let you risk your life in such a hopeless thing as trying to help me. You would simply be killed and I would still have to face the horror that I must face anyway. Please go. Maybe later, when the American law is enforced here, you can come back and we shall see each other. Some of my father's old servants here are my friends and maybe they will help me find a way out. They are outnumbered by the men Torres has brought here and my uncle won't let them have any kind of weapons. Please go before Pancho Torres and his killer dogs come back. They're out looking for you and your friend."

"Yeah, I saw them up the crick," Dave admitted with a cold grimness in his voice that had not been there a moment before. "I'm not running away from danger as long as you need a friend, Raquel. I'm asking you again to tell me, if you know, how to find that feller they've sent for in Correlitos. You started to tell me something in the mountains today, but didn't get to finish, and you didn't tell Conchita who he is. Now tell me."

"What possible good can that do?" she demanded, looking up at his face in the dim light from the window. "He is Renaldo Montero, and he is with a large bunch of Pancho's *bandidos* at the hangout in Correlitos. You can't possibly think of going there. They would kill you without winking an eye."

"Renaldo Montero, huh?" he repeated the name. "I'll find the Señor Montero all right, and after I do, Raquel, I'll be riding through your front gate tomorrow—"

He ceased speaking as a violent knocking sounded on the door.

"Raquel! Raquel!" the familiar voice of Alfredo de Aragon called through the door at the other side of the girl's big room. "Who are you talking to? Who is that in there with you?"

"No one, Uncle," she replied quickly, with brave emphasis. "I was talking to Panterito."

She ran like a flitting wraith in the darkness across the room to the corner, stooped, picked up something, and ran back over the thickly carpted floor while her uncle was speaking again.

"Does that beast speak like a man?" de Aragon demanded with

angry brusqueness. "I heard a man's voice! Open the door, Raquel! *Open the door!*"

A violent rapping came again on the door then.

Raquel rushed at Dave Warner and pushed a coil of leather rope into his hand.

"It's my own lariat," she whispered with frantic haste. "Use it —out the window quick! Double it around an iron bar so you can pull it down after you! I must open the door! Quick! Hurry!"

"Bueno!" Alfredo de Aragon called more angrily now through the door. "I'll have the place surrounded and catch him!"

Hard, quick steps rushed away from the girl's door. Dave was already dropping the long plaited leather lariat around one of the rear bars of the window. The moon was above the eastern horizon, flooding the world with its brilliant glow, casting long shadows. While he worked with quickened hands to drop the lariat toward the ground, Dave glanced out across the ground over and beyond the yard wall. Movement there had caught his eye. He now saw a man leading two horses at a trot out toward the cattle pens a hundred yards eastward. Something was driving Jerry away!

Then for a second Dave turned his eyes to strain at the moon-flooded distance up the trail whence he and Jerry had come. In the far background of the moonlit picture, with the silvery radiance on the prairie back of them, he could see moving objects and knew they were men on horseback. Torres and his men returning!

He swung the brace of iron bars outward, caught the leather lariat with strong hands and dropped swiftly to the ground.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ANGRY voice of Alfredo de Aragon was shouting orders in Spanish as he ran back through the long rear part of the house. There was an indefinable noise of stirring men and sleepy voices crying lazy questions. Dave Warner did not lose one second in waiting to study these sounds or hear the words spoken.

He left the rope dangling for Raquel to retrieve and speed on light feet across to the tree by which he had descended into the yard. He jumped within the shadows of the tree and wall as he saw in one swift, jumbled glimpse that several men were piling out through windows back there.

With cat-like agility, Dave sped up the tree and out along the big limb extending above the wall. Several of the Mexicans were out of the house now and running like a pack of wolves across the wide yard toward the tree. One of them had been thoughtful enough to seize a gun for there was a sharp, snappy report of a shot and a bullet zipped through the shaking leaves over Dave's head.

He was above the wall then, the limb bending down under his weight until it almost touched the top of the stone barrier. He put his feet upon the narrow top, dropped down the outside while his hands still held to the rim, then turned loose and fell the few feet to the ground. Without a second's hesitation, he started out with all speed after Jerry and the horses. He could not see Jerry, but he did see, with a quick side glance, the oncoming troop of riders three or four hundred yards away. Men were shouting themselves hoarse inside the yard and coming close now to the tree.

In less than fifteen seconds Dave rounded the corner of the cow corrals. He almost ran into Jerry and the horses just around the corner.

"Them devils was acomin'!" Jerry began wildly to explain before Dave could speak, "and I hadda light out like you said for me—"

"Never mind!" Dave flashed at him, snatching his bridle reins and leaping for the saddle, "skin aboard your bronc! We gotta ride for life and everything! Come on, cowboy, *ride!*"

Dave was comforted by the knowledge that not only were his and Jerry's horses topnotch racers, fleet of foot as any of their mustang breed and as long-winded as the toughest wild ones, but they had

not been ridden as hard within the last hours as those under Torres and his men. He directed their course straight out to the southeast, toward the thin, distant line of the mesa which was two miles or more away. In that direction, somewhere, they would find the way to Correlitos.

By a first hard burst of speed, keeping the cow corrals between them and the arriving troop of Torres men, Dave hoped to be out of sight by the time Torres arrived and learned of their departure. In this hope he was very soon disappointed.

The valley floor, between the house and the rim of the mesa east and south, was level grass land and treeless. There was no sign of trail, but the running Texans kept straight ahead for several hundred yards at top speed. Then Dave turned his head to look back while he kept Cannon Ball going. Jerry saw him and turned in his own saddle to gaze backward toward the still visible ranch house and cow corral.

"Goshawmighty, Dave," he cried, "they're chasin' us! There they come right out this way from them cow pens!"

Dave had turned his attention again to the country ahead of them.

"Sure, I see 'em!" he shouted at Jerry. "Our main trouble's ahead —how to find the trail to Correlitos and get up the mesa rim over yonder."

He reined Cannon Ball to the right, changing their course by a quarter turn. They ran on for a half mile before Jerry, coming a little behind Dave, shouted again.

"They've seen our turn," he cried. "They're cuttin' acrost the bend and that's gonna lessen the distance 'tween us!"

"Never mind them!" Dave shouted over his shoulder. "Let's edge over toward the mesa. Maybe we can find a pass to the top without waiting to find the road!"

They changed their course again, going slantingly southeastward which should bring them within a mile close enough to the mesa wall to inspect it for passable breaks. Their pursuers, apparently the whole pack of ten or twelve riders they had seen earlier in the evening, were plainly visible in the moonlight some five hundred yards behind.

After five minutes more, the course began to lift on a gradual swell toward the mesa wall. The grass underfoot became less dense; there were occasional bare spots and the horses began to break their steady gait when their shod feet struck small rocks. They could see the solid, perpendicular wall of the mesa now. It was at least a hundred

feet high. No breaks were visible anywhere within range permitted by the moonlight.

"Hey, we'd better cut back to the smoother ground!" Jerry shouted warning. "My bronc nearly went down on a rock then!"

Dave thought well of the suggestion and leaned in the saddle to the right. Cannon Ball seemed grateful and quickly swerved toward the lower, less rocky ground. Not more than thirty yards had been covered when a wild cry of sudden terror burst from Jerry Hope. Dave turned his startled glance in time to see the lanky cowboy shooting through the air, over the head of his tumbling horse. A quick jerk on Cannon Ball's reins stopped the fast animal and turned him back in a short circle.

Jerry Hope bounced up from the ground, shouting furiously, pouring out futile curses at the rocky ground in general and in particular at the rock which had tripped his horse. He was at the head of his horse instantly, grabbing the reins, urging the mustang to get up. Dave Warner looked anxiously toward their pursuers and saw them eating up the intervening distance with alarming speed. He could hear the mumble of the Mexicans' shouting and knew that they had seen and understood the mishap here. The distance was shortening, was now little more than three hundred yards and each second cut eight or ten yards off that distance.

"Hop on 'im!" Dave shouted in a frenzy. "If he can't go, you'll have to ride double with me!"

Jerry was in the saddle by the time Dave finished speaking. He spurred his horse, determined to know the worst at once. The animal snorted and leaped away while Dave held back to make sure of the outcome. By now the pursuers were two hundred and fifty yards away and a few of the foolish Torres men were firing their pistols. Some of their bullets droned through the air past the racing Texans, already spent and harmless. But Dave knew that those same guns, so harmless now, could be very deadly at close range.

He saw that Jerry's horse was apparently unhurt and making as good speed as ever. He watched his partner while giving quick, surreptitious glances leftward at the mesa rim. Desperation was beginning to bring a cold sweat to his brow and neck as his searching eyes saw nothing but the unbroken, solid rock wall.

"Maybe we'd better get clear back out on the grass and outrun them fellers!" he called to Jerry. "Guess we won't find no pass up that wall!"

He saw it even as Jerry shouted, for his fleeting glance was roving on far down the southward curve of the mesa rim.

"There's a break 'way down younder ahead!" Jerry shouted.

"I see it now," Dave answered and let his horse keep straight on his course. "I hope it's the regular pass up to the top, Jerry!"

"What good's it gonna do us if it is?" Jerry spoke his worry. "They'll ketch up with us quicker then. We'd better stop and face 'em now, damn 'em! I don't hanker to have no Mex bullets pepperin' me in the back!"

"They wouldn't just pepper you—they'd bust your backbone wide open!" Dave told him. "Come on! That's the pass, all right. If it's narrow enough, we can hold 'em back with a few shots and skip on."

Cannon Ball turned slightly in his course, going directly toward the now clearly visible break in the high rock wall. His feet pounded on softer ground. Dave looked down, studying the ground and recognized the dim markings of the trail. He yelled his discovery to Jerry.

"It's the road to Correlitos, I'll bet," he went on with rising enthusiasm.

"Yeah, and what of it?" Jerry asked derisively. "It'll jest put us 'tween the devil's hot pitchfork and his fire. Ain't you stopped to think none, Dave? These here devils back o' us and another big passle o' them on ahead. What the demnition bow-wows you figger we gonna do—fight the Mexican war all over ag'in'."

The horses breathed hard now, for the tiring long run was added to by a sharp climb in the trail. The moon was hidden by the high mesa top, but a wide crack in the wall showed a streak of gray sky immediately before the riders, lifting the trail at a steep angle. Dave surveyed the approach to the pass as closely as he could in the deeper shadows there and could not discover any other way up except by the one narrow defile he and Jerry followed. Bullets spattered against the rocks ahead of them and one glanced off, singing an ugly song. The pursuers were gaining ground.

"Say, they're gittin' too close!" Jerry yelled. *"Hey, damn 'em, I'm hit!"*

Dave was ahead as they went in single file up the narrow pass trail. He looked back in sudden alarm and saw Jerry leaning over his saddle horn, urging his horse against Cannon Ball's rump.

"You hurt bad, Jerry?" he asked, then dodged as a bullet zoomed off the rocky facing of the pass a few feet from his head.

"No," Jerry replied, "jest a durn hard kick on my shoulder blade that made me think for a bit that I was a dead 'un. Don't think it even broke the skin. Let's stop behind this bend and give 'em something for Davy Crockett."

"Let's get to the top first so we can cache our broncs 'fore we start the water to boiling. I'd like a shot at that head devil, Pancho Torres. That'd settle the whole business right here so we wouldn't have to go on to Correlitos."

The narrow walls on either side of the pass opened out half way to the top and a wide, quarter acre space of moonlit, rocky terrain lay slanting before the anxious youths. Big boulders, shoulder high to a man, lay haphazardly about the steep incline. Dave could hear the rumble of the pursuers coming then into the closely walled pass below. He urged his horse to greater effort and quickly came to the nearly level ground of the mesa top.

"Let's drop reins behind them big rocks yonder," Dave pointed to an especially large jumble of rocks much higher than a man's head, "and come back behind these here to stop the coyotes."

They fell out of their saddles, dropped reins over jagged corners of the rocks and left their horses gratefully getting their breath. Dave snatched his two extra loaded pistol cylinders from his saddle bags and stuffed them into his vest pockets, asking Jerry meanwhile to do the same with his own extra cylinders.

They ran back with drawn guns and fell in behind the rocks where a commanding view of the pass mouth and rocks below could be had. They went cold with consternation as they saw several men already out of the defile mouth and jumping from behind one big rock to another up the incline, spreading out to both sides. It seemed they must soon be surrounded and overwhelmed.

CHAPTER SIX

ON EACH side of the steep, rock-filled space, curving around and growing less precipitous at the top of the incline, the walls of stone were about twenty steps to right and left of Dave and Jerry. If they could hold the attackers below them, prevent them from climbing those walls and getting in their rear, they could hope to drive them back into the narrow passage below.

Dave heard the bellowing big voice of Pancho Torres down near the mouth of the defile, shouting orders to his men, directing them to spread out and surround the Texans. The youth looked around the end of the big flat rock behind which he and Jerry lay, searching for a glimpse of the big Mexican. While he looked, a stooping form ran out from one boulder down to his left, dashing for another hiding place farther up.

The big cap-and-ball .45 in Dave's right hand came up and blazed, sending the first lead from the fighting pair of young Americans. The running figure sprang straight up into the air, threw a rifle over his head and then fell, tumbling backwards down beside the rock from which he had come. Jerry's gun roared then, bringing a wild yell of pain from one of the attackers over on the north side.

"I sent the devil slidin' back to his hole!" Jerry shouted to Dave. "And there's another'n!"

"Boom!" Jerry's heavy gun thundered again at a running figure that was directly opposite the two hidden partners, on the north side.

The runner stopped his upward climb, whirled around and started uncertainly back whence he had just come. Jerry fired again and the fellow tumbled headlong, sprawling, head down the side of the steep mesa shoulder, and lay still.

"Don't go one or two at a time, you fools!" shouted Torres. "Get ready now and all go up together when I say go, and take them from behind. Ready! Go!"

Dave and Jerry had no time to advise with one another as to their defense. Coolly, with careful aim, Dave lifted both guns and poured lead at the five men running up on the south side. Three times in quick succession he thumbed back the hammers, sending three of the men staggering backward to fall and squirm in agony from wounds. Two others fell in behind the boulder toward which they

had all started to run.

"I stopped 'em on this side!" Jerry cried over his shoulder. "You git any over there, Dave?"

Dave did not answer at once. He was watching for sight of the men who had escaped his lead and was giving a quick glance in between times with an effort to get sight of Torres. The big leader of the attackers hadn't left his place of hiding down at the mouth of the narrow pass. The tall, peaked crown of a sombrero appeared slowly above a high rock down there, outlined clearly in the silvery moonlight. Dave fired at where he thought the head of Pancho Torres should be under that big hat.

The hat flew off and disappeared below. A loud bellow of sudden fright and rage came from below that rock, then richly flavored, fancy cursing in Spanish.

The fast-roving eyes of the Texan then saw a hatless black head appearing around the upper side of the rock which hid the two men he had missed in the combined charge. He fired quickly without aiming except by hand and arm instinct. Instantly a Mexican leaped out from behind that rock, his hands to his face, and ran with long leaps down the declivity, yelling in a frenzy of terror and pain. He stumbled a few steps above the rock which hid Pancho Torres and went tumbling down, heels over head, to fall in and wriggle himself behind that rock.

"How many you reckon's left on your side, Jerry?" Dave asked.

"Maybe two or three," Jerry replied. "One's lyin' down there squawkin' and beggin' them other hidin' skunks to pull 'im back. Oughtn't I finish him jest to be merciful? I musta busted his hip."

Pancho Torres lifted his voice then.

"*Oye, Americanos!* Listen, you Americans! Surrender and I'll let you leave the country peacefully," he shouted.

"Yeah," Jerry Hope replied sarcastically, "like old Santa Ana let Davy Crockett and his men go! You surrender, you big greasy lump o' pig lard and we'll maybe let you go peacefully!"

"I've sent for more men," Torres called again, keeping well hidden below his rock. "I've got men going up around back of you right now. Surrender without another shot, or we'll tie you out in the hot sun tomorrow with your eye-lids cut off and let you take a day or two to die. That isn't a pleasant way to die!"

"No way at your dirty hands is a pleasant way to die, Pancho Torres!" Dave Warner answered. "You're lying when you hand us

that bluff about men getting in back of us. Listen! For the sake of your wounded men I'll make a deal with you. You can come out and pick up your dead and wounded and take them away if you'll hurry and get down through that crack of the pass quick! Do you want to accept those terms?"

Torres hesitated, obviously in a rage, wanting his vengeance on these two men who had wreaked such havoc with his forces. Two wounded men lying along that rocky, steep slope, shouted in strained, agonized voices, pleading with him to accept the terms and save them.

"Bueno," Torres finally agreed in a thick, unpleasant voice. "We'll let you two go if you promise to get off Aragon land and never come here again."

"You're not giving us the terms, Pancho," Dave replied. "You'll either accept or refuse the terms we offer you. Come out and pick up your dead and wounded, then get going quick!"

"All right, *gringos,*" Torres agreed and seemed to be choking on the words, "but you had better ride fast and far from here. I am the master of all this country and if you are ever found in here after tonight, I'll do what I promised to you."

He then gave orders to his remaining able-bodied men to get out and pick up their fallen comrades. With nervous haste, four sombreroed men worked hard and fast, picking up groaning wounded men first and carrying them down into the dark pass. They next picked up inert, apparently lifeless forms of four men and finally got the last of these out of sight below.

Dave and Jerry watched until the work was done and saw the big shape of Pancho Torres when he went hastily, stooping, from his hiding place into the mouth of the big defile. The big leader did not say anything further, but seemed glad to get away now, whatever may have been his dreams of later vengeance.

"Come on—let's skedaddle 'fore any of 'em sneak back," Dave advised, rushing away toward their horses, "though I guess they got a bellyful for this time."

Jerry followed closely up over the lip of the mesa and ran in with Dave to their well-rested mounts. Within a few seconds they were riding at a brisk trot out upon the level stretch of mesa land, following the worn, clearly marked trail from the pass to Correlitos.

After a half mile they found the trail leading through uneven country on which stunted jackpine and varied chaparral grew. Here and there they passed open patches of grass, with half-buried rocks

scattered about in the moonlight like bedded cows asleep. Suddenly both young men whirled in unison, without a word, and dropped to the ground. Faintly, but with unmistakable sound, came the rapid patter of horse hoofs pounding the hard desert trail over which the two Texans had but recently come. They strained their eyes in the bright radiance of the desert moon, gazing into the northwest. In a moment they saw a lone rider urging his horse along at a running gait, going toward Correlitos.

The horseman swept past, less than a hundred yards from the two watching youths. He was hatless and rode bareback.

"He's sure in a rattlin' big hurry to get somewhere," Dave commented.

"That Torres lobo is sendin' him to tell his dogs in Correlitos to take a bite at us if we show up there," Jerry guessed in a moaning tone. "We git into hotter and hotter water ev'ry turn we make."

"Maybe," Dave mused. "But if he was sent by Torres, he would likely be riding in a saddle and have his hat. Whoever he is, he'll be waiting for us in Correlitos tomorrow. Let's go on and get some sleep."

"Goshawmighty, but you're a hard-headed mule!" Jerry Hope exclaimed. However, he followed Dave obediently without further argument for he knew such would be a waste of time.

Before they rolled into their blankets they cleaned their gun barrels and reloaded their empty cylinders, supplying themselves again with thirty-six ready shots apiece. Before another twenty-four hours should pass they expected to have need of all those loaded cylinders for their .45's. Jerry Hope worked over his heavy guns with loving solicitude, talking to them as if to living persons whom he held in high esteem. He was a paradox, for he pretended to dislike danger, yet he apparently received his greatest thrill in preparing for and facing it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AT BREAK of day on the following morning Dave and Jerry rolled out of their blankets.

With rising anticipation of unknown, but very certain dangers ahead, they turned their horses' heads down the trail toward the southeast. They had heard of Correlitos from several different sources and knew that it should be not over two hours' ride away now.

"Look!" Dave cried suddenly, waving a hand at the trail ahead. He leaned in the saddle and put Cannon Ball into a gallop. "Somebody come up over the rise way down there, then ducked out to the side of the trail soon's he saw us."

Jerry spurred his horse and caught up with Dave, galloping beside him.

"You follow the trail," Dave directed, "and if you see more coming in sight, skip out after me across the flats. I'm gonna see why that feller skedaddled so quick. Watch out for him!"

Before Jerry could protest, as he started to do, Dave was gone at a fast run out across the flat stretch of ground left of the trail. Far on down ahead of him there were greasewood and mesquite where the ground dipped off into the low country beyond. Jerry made his horse run along the trail, keeping nearly even with Dave as the latter circled out and advanced toward the screening brush into which the rider ahead had disappeared.

At a hundred yards from the drooping, heat-withered mesquite, Dave saw the white of a person's clothing, then through the tangle of twigs and limbs, he saw the outlines of a horse with a bare-headed rider. The hidden rider seemed to be waiting and watching, but he made no move to run away as Dave cautiously rode on around to where a better view was obtainable. Then the sharp eyes of the Texas cowboy recognized the hatless bareback rider he and Jerry had seen during the night. He rode on, wondering deeply, and met Jerry as the latter came out from the trail toward the silent, watchful horseman.

As the two youths came close they saw that the rider was a boy of not more than fifteen, a brown-skinned, fullblooded Indian, but with the clipped hair and dress of the Mexican servant class. He wore no shoes on his once brown feet that were now gray with the trail dust.

His watchful, intelligent black eyes observed the two young white men with flashing alertness as they rode up to him. Dave spoke to him in Spanish.

"Greetings, young fellow," he said. "Were you running away from meeting us?"

"Until I could be sure of you, yes, señor," the boy admitted. "I searched for two young *Americanos* in Correlitos, but had to run before I could make sure if you come there last night."

"Who did you look for in Correlitos?" Dave asked.

"For a señor named Dave Wanner, who rides with another *Americano* who is not so handsome," the boy replied naively.

Dave Warner was too intensely interested by the boy's first words to notice the startled grunt of displeasure that broke from Jerry Hope's lips then. The boy's garbling of his name was easy to understand, but instantly came thoughts of Raquel de Aragon. Maybe she was in great trouble because of his visit on the previous night and had sent this messenger to ask his help in her dire extremity. Nothing but the most serious trouble could have caused her to send for him.

"Who sent you to look for Dave Warner?" he demanded with quick, nervous speech. "I am Dave Warner. Who sent you?"

"You are the Señor Dave Wanner, I know," the boy replied placidly, eyeing Dave's form from head to foot. "The señorita Raquel tell me how you look. I know you, or I would not have waited here for you to catch me."

"What did she send you to me for?" Dave asked again with rising impatience, vexed at the boy's stoical indifference. "Is she in trouble? Does she need our help?"

"Not that, señor," the boy declared with unchanging face and without blinking his black eyes. "She say for you to go very fast away from this country. She say you must not stay in Correlitos for Pancho Torres will soon send bad men there today. That is why I did not want others to see me on the trail. Señor Pancho is very, very angry because you and your friend kill so many of his men and hurt others so much. He still has fifteen men at Rancho Bonita. They take the pet panther of the Señorita Raquel and will not give him food until they catch you and your friend, then they put the hungry panther in same room with you so he will kill and eat you. If he will not kill you, they cut your eyelids off and tie you out under the sun to die slow and terrible death. Señor Pancho is a very bad man."

"But how about the Señorita Raquel?" Dave leaned toward the boy, demanding. "You talk about everything but her. What have they done to her?"

"Don Alfredo make her stay in her room. She write on paper to you and talked to me from her window when I go past in the yard. She throw the paper down to me and told me how to find you, how to tell you, and she say if anyone try to take paper from me, I must eat it. Señor Pancho see me come from under window and try to take paper from me, but I swallow it, then I run, get horse, come quick. Renaldo Monterey try to catch me in Correlitos. He makes great fiesta with his friends because he go tonight to marry the Señorita Raquel. He is a very great fool and when I tell him so, he want to kill me. He drinks mescal at the Cantina Mercedes."

"All right, young fellow," Dave said. "Now I want you to take a message back to Rancho Bonita for us. What is your name?"

"Jimmy," the boy answered, his eyes glittering as if it pleased him to tell his name that way.

"Jimmy! Jimmy, you say? That's American for James—Diego in your language. Why don't they call you Diego, or Dieguito?"

"The Señora Carlota, mother of the señorita, was American lady. She name me. I like to be always named Jimmy because she was a very good, very great lady."

Dave looked quickly around at Jerry Hope, his eyes shining with new pleasure. Then he spoke to the boy again.

"Then Señorita Raquel is half American, like us?" he asked, motioning a hand at Jerry and himself.

"Yes, señor. That is why Don Alfredo maybe not like the señorita. Don Alfredo and Señor Pancho very much hate *Americanos.*"

"And do you who have always lived at Rancho Bonita hate the *Americanos?*"

"No, señor. We hate only Pancho Torres and his bad men, because they are not good Mexicans, but we can do nothing. Don Alfredo is friend of Pancho. They take our guns and knives from us when Pancho and his men come to stay long time at the rancho. They beat us, make us work hard while they play with the cards, eat and enjoy life. They some times drive away the cattle that belong to the Señorita Raquel, but they do not give her money for the cattle they steal that way."

"How many men at Rancho Bonita who will fight for Señorita Raquel, Jimmy?"

"Only five now, señor. When I was a little boy, there were maybe forty. The Apaches killed twelve with the señor and señora. Thieves of cattle from Sonora kill some more. Some go away when Don Alfredo come to be master. Pancho Torres and his men kill three more. Now only five men there who will fight for the señorita if they have guns and knives to fight with. Three boys like me, too. We fight like men. We can shoot guns straight and I can throw a knife half a finger into a tree twenty steps away."

"Now we are getting somewhere, Jimmy," Dave said, warming up hopefully. "You go back to Rancho Bonita. Tell your friends to be ready to fight. Tonight when Renaldo Montero rides into the front gate of the rancho with a friend riding beside him, you and your friends be ready to take knives and guns from Torres men to fight with. If you can talk in whispers to the señorita, tell her that my friend and I will be there, that I will be the one who rides through the gate. My friend and I will get inside, then when they see that I am not Renaldo Montero, maybe they will try to kill us, maybe they will kill us. But we will give Don Alfredo a chance to keep his oath that Señorita Raquel must marry the first stranger who comes through the gate tonight. If that fails and they want to kill us—well, Jimmy, we will have one great fight, maybe clean Rancho Bonita of the devils and let you people have a happy home again. Will you take that message, Jimmy, and see that your friends are ready to steal guns and knives and help us when the fighting begins?"

The boy's dark eyes were gazing out beyond the mesquite bushes, straining at the far distance along the northwest stretch of the trail.

"I understand, señor," he said, still gazing away, "and I must ride around toward the mountains, for there comes Torres' men. You must hide, or they will take you alive for Pancho to torture."

Dave and Jerry twisted quickly in their saddles to look at the moving specks on the far horizon. The boy's keen eyes had not erred.

"Good," Dave said, "we must get on to Correlitos. Go fast, Jimmy, around them and get to the rancho. We shall be in there tonight, barring accidents—and there won't be no accidents to us. *Adios, chiquito!*"

The boy looked worried and questioningly at the two Texans as they rode away from him, but whatever bothered him was not sufficient to make him question these capable looking white men. He rode behind the screen of bushes to the north as Dave and Jerry hit the slope, heading for Correlitos.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RIDING DOWN from the mesa shoulder into the lowlands, Dave and Jerry could see the cluster of houses that was Correlitos three miles away, sitting astride the river which came wandering down the long, wide valley from the northeast. Cottonwoods and other trees marked the course of the stream. Here and there, all over the valley, specks of cattle, looking like creeping ants in the sun-blazed distance, grazed on the bunch grass, or moved toward the shade and water at the river for their mid-day period of rest.

"Why the samhill you reckon them Torres lobos didn't come after us quicker, soon's the boy come?" Jerry wondered at Dave.

"Too lazy, or maybe patching up their sores," Dave guessed.

"How're we gonna keep 'em from ketchin' us in Correlitos?" Jerry went on anxiously. "What's the use o' goin' on there now, anyhow? We can circle 'round and hit the rancho after dark like you told the Injun lad."

"That's the big rub in our scheme, Jerry," Dave talked across the noise of their gallop, "because we'd have mighty little chance of getting that front gate opened to us if we don't make them skunks think I'm that Montero spig."

"But I still don't see why we gotta run this ga'ntlet in Correlitos," Jerry insisted more loudly.

"I've gotta look like Montero and talk like him at the gate tonight, haven't I?" Dave asked. "I want a peek at the cuss, anyway. First I had figgered on his riding alone to the rancho late today, so's to arrive there after dark. I wanted to grab 'im out on the trail. Now I guess some of them devils behind us will fan along back with 'im unless we can figger a way to lead them off. They're about eight or ten miles back and it's too hot for 'em to ride fast. Maybe we can get done in Correlitos 'fore they slope in, if we don't have no trouble. Then we'll ride-hell-for-'lection up the river yonder. The Correlitos bunch will tell these others when they get in as to where we drifted. They'll come after us when they've chucked up and had some mescal. We smudge our trail, turn back to the mesa and lay for Montero's scalp as he goes wife hunting."

Jerry shook his head doubtfully.

"Lotta ways for that trap to be sprung the wrong way," he com-

plained. He glanced up the valley and let his eyes rest for a moment on something he saw. "Say, ain't that two—yeah, it's sure two riders and wearin' American hats a-comin' yonder. See 'em! I bet they're Tejanos, 'cause no Mexies wear hats like them!"

Dave looked closely at two horsemen who had come out from the tree-lined river and rode toward him and Jerry as if to meet them before they reached the town. They were more than a quarter of a mile away, but their hats were clearly not the peaked, big affairs worn by all Mexican riders. The two young Texans veered off the trail and went directly to meet the men. In two minutes the four came in hailing distance. There was no longer doubt that the two were Americans.

"Hi, Fremonters, or Tejanos, or whatever you be!" Jerry Hope shouted greetings, waving at the others. "Headed for California?"

The four met then, eyeing one another closely, but there was distinct friendliness in every eye and unmistakable gladness in those of the strangers. They were two young men, not older than Dave and Jerry, but more trail-worn and dusty. They wore a two or three weeks' growth of beard and at their right hips swung military cap-and-ball revolvers.

"Yeah, we're Fremonters, all right," one of them with yellow hair and beard declared, "or we was, and we wanta be ag'in."

They rode close to Dave and Jerry and reached over for handshakes.

"We sure are glad to meet white men," the yellow-haired spokesman went on. "I'm Jack Tait and my pardner's Al Green. We was with General Fremont and helped take California from the Mexies. Was you fellers out thataway?"

"Nope, we're from Texas," Dave replied. "Started out for California. I'm Dave Warner. That sheepish-looking gent wears the name of Jerry Hope."

"Yeah, my name's Hope," Jerry confirmed, "and I sure wear it good, for I'm hopin' to see the golden land o' California some day if my pardner here don't lead us too far strayin' from the trail. Tell us 'bout California, pards."

"Then if you've not been there," Jack Tait went on, "we are safe in tellin' you. Thought you might be Kearnyites. We was with Charley Fremont through all hell, explorin', then conquerin' a new empire. Then our chief gets a dirty deal and kicked out as governor o' California by old Kearny. We sloped out, not wantin' nothin' to

do with them that don't know how to play straight. We fooled around south California a bit, then we heard our old chief, General Fremont, was headin' west through this country, lining out new trails on the south route to California from St. Louis. We broke out with a fever to get with him, so here we are. You fellers heard anything over east o' here 'bout the General?"

"We heard he was in Santa Fe some time back," Dave told him. "Some o' his men are said to be posted at Skaggs' Fort 'bout a hundred miles northeast."

"Then we'll hit for there, or on to Santa Fe," Tait declared. "But we are 'bout to starve. We had no money, but plenty powder and balls when we left California. Two days back, swimmin' the Gila, we lost all our powder. We got plenty bullets, but no powder. How're you fellers supplied? Ain't got no powder to spare, have you?"

"Have you been in Correlitos yet?" Dave Warner asked, a new idea buzzing in his head.

"No. We stopped in the shade over there by the river," Tait explained, "and was debatin' whether to tackle the Mexies for a plate o' beans and maybe beg a little powder. Al was skeered for us to let 'em know our guns was jest empty irons."

"How are your broncs? They good for a stiff, fast ride and a long one?" Dave asked.

"Yeah. We been nursin' 'em careful all along. Not been any real hard pulls for 'em yet. Why?"

"We haven't much time to move in," Dave explained, starting his horse toward town. "Let's get on to the river while we talk. We'll cut in just above town yonder. We got a cake of soap and a razor. You fellers shave them beards so you'll look not too different from us. We'll ride into town together, let the Mexies there see us. Then you look back up the mesa trail and see these lobos that are after us that don't know us from you, unless Pancho Torres, their leader, happens to be with 'em. You hit the up-river trail hard and fast. Don't let them Mexies catch you. Keep going on to Skaggs' Fort or clear on to Santa Fe, just so you don't let these devils get you, or they'll torture you. You'll be taken for us if our scheme works. If you'll lead 'em off us that way, we'll supply you with plenty powder and I'll give you a half eagle to boot. Will you do it?"

"Sure," Jack Tait agreed. "Our horses can outrun anything these here Mexies straddle. Let's take 'em up, Al."

It was agreed. The two ex-soldiers of Fremont's empire conquerors went into the adventure with their eyes open—and without their stubby beards. Shaved and cleaned up at the river edge under the cottonwood trees, they rode back with Dave and Jerry toward the little town. A rickety bridge of cottonwood poles and logs spanned the small river, separating a cluster of adobe huts on the north side from the main section of town on the south. As they crossed the bridge they could see a small cloud of dust on the trail coming down from the mesa nearly three miles away.

"Let's wait under them trees behind that old church yonder," Dave suggested, waving his hand toward a little adobe church with a high wooden steeple and belfry. "When them lobos come close enough to see you run out, you fellers hit up-river on this side. Let them keep in sight as long as you can draw 'em off till near night. Then we'll be through with our work 'fore they come back to a hot reception."

A few dusky children, some of the smaller ones naked, stood about at a distance and gazed at the strange white men sitting on their horses under the church trees. The four men watched the approach of a half dozen riders coming across the valley. Those riders were finally within a quarter mile of the bridge when Dave spoke.

"All right, fellers," he said. "Good luck—and don't let 'em take you alive. Ride out there facing the bridge, stop and look at 'em a few seconds, then take off up the river on this side like the devil was after you."

There were last hasty handshakes and exchange of good wishes, then Jack Tait and Al Green rode out toward the south end of the bridge. They stopped their horses there for a moment, gazed as if quite surprised across at the oncoming troop of a half dozen men. Then they twisted their horses around and spurred them into a quick run along the open south side of the river.

There were loud yells from the advancing riders. Hands pointed and horses were spurred in urgent pursuit. Instead of turning off up the north side of the river as Dave had hoped they would, the Torres men jammed their way across the narrow pole bridge and took out after the fleeing pair without a glance toward Dave and Jerry under the trees. In a few minutes pursued and pursuers had gone out of sight around a bend in the river, nearly a half mile away.

"It worked like lightning with greased runways, Jerry!" Dave exclaimed. "That was a lucky break, running into them fellers."

"Yeah, but now we gotta face some tough music here," Jerry came

up with his never-failing pessimism. "We'd better kept them soldiers here to help us."

"Aw, come on," Dave invited. "We'll find Montero, size him up, then get ready to lay for him on the trail to the rancho tonight."

They rode around the bending street and came in sight of the little business section of the village. It was a village of the usual Mexican adobe construction. There was not a wooden house in the place. Signs in crudely painted Spanish announced a tailoring shop, then a combined grocery and dry-goods *cajon,* a chili restaurant and, set apart from other houses, a wide, flat-topped structure with the most ambitious sign in the town announcing the *Cantina Mercedes.*

It was unusual for a Mexican town to have many people out and stirring about, or even patronizing drinking places during the heat of a summer day. But the noises of strumming guitars, song and boisterous talk came from behind the cantina.

"They're still celebrating Montero's coming marriage," Dave guessed aloud to Jerry. "Let's hitch our horses at that pole on the east side in the shade, where we can get at 'em quick and easy."

They turned their horses in beside the east side of the cantina and as they rode back of the front house line, they saw a lounging, barefooted Mexican get up from drowsing in front of the big cantina and quickly disappear inside.

"Our advance messenger, announcing our arrival," Dave told Jerry grimly when he saw his freckled friend watching the Mexican.

"Yeah," Jerry grunted, "I feel jest like I was walkin' acrost a barrel o' gunpowder, with a fuse sizzlin' up close to its bottom."

CHAPTER NINE

THERE were several cottonwood trees with wide-spreading limbs visible over the back end of the cantina. An adobe wall, higher than a man's head, extended beyond the back wall of the main house, enclosing what Dave and Jerry supposed was the usual outdoor tree garden of such places. Droning noise of many chattering voices and one indolently played guitar floated over that wall to the ears of the young men. They hitched their horses and started back to the front.

Dark faces, shadowed by the interior, watched the two Americans from the narrow, tall windows along the east side of the long wall, about every ten feet.

There was an ominous silence suddenly spread over the vast interior of the cantina as the two Texans stepped through. After the bright sunlight outside, the place looked dark at first. Dave led the way toward the back end where he at once saw a dozen men, some with the high-peaked, big sombreros of Mexican riding men, standing beside, or leaning on a long bar which crossed most of the room's width. Beyond each short end of the bar a door opened out into the rear patio where unbroken merriment still went on.

Some men sat on little high-backed benches around tables at the far left side of the big room and nearer the front end. One glance toward them was sufficient to show Dave that they played cards. Some of the card players looked darkly at the young Americans as these walked unhastily back to the bar.

There were more scowls, closer at hand, from big, swaggering men at the bar. Dave went to the vacant short end of the bar, where it curved around to the wall. Jerry followed him there. Two bartenders were behind the bar, one an olive-skinned white man, the other a mestizo type. Dave guessed that the white man was a Spaniard and hoped he was the proprietor.

The white bartender came to the two new customers, wiped at the bar in front of them with a soiled cloth, and asked in broken English what they would have.

"Mescal," Dave ordered and Jerry looked at him, frowning.

"I don't like that throat-scorchin' stuff," he said as the bartender turned back to fill the order. "Why you takin' it? Maybe they got some good white man's licker here."

"Shut up, slow-poke, and use your head," Dave warned as his eyes roved down the line of the bar's customers in an apparently casual glance. "We order their kind of drink and get about a ton less of their hatred."

Already the beneficent result of the mescal order was visible in the faces of the men. They relaxed and began talking again, having been silent like stone statues from the time Dave and Jerry came to the bar.

"This sure is hotter country than California," Dave said by way of opening conversation with the man before him.

"You gentlemens been een California?" the bartender asked.

Jerry Hope lifted his goblet toward Dave's and scowled. They drank the unpleasant liquor together and by supreme exertions of self-control, managed not to grimace because of the flame in their throats.

"Yes, we was there a while," Dave told the waiting bartender, "but we didn't like the new set-up out there. Seems like you're having some sorta fiesta here. Would we offend if we help the celebration?" He wanted Montero identified without having to ask about him.

"No, señor," came the quick answer with a more pleased look. "You buy dreenks for Renaldo Montero and heez friends, that make all be your friends. You weel do that?"

The bartender had given Dave change for the ten dollar gold coin with which he had paid for their first drinks. Dave glanced down, counting the change—a five dollar American gold piece and the rest in Mexican silver—finding that the mescal was ten cents a drink. He wondered if all the men inside the big room and more from outside in the patio would be called in for the general treat, then decided that it would be worth the price if that would show him Renaldo Montero. He answered the man behind the bar with a show of pleasure, and the bartender smiled in approval.

"Sure, ask everybody to drink to the celebration, whatever it's for," he agreed. "What's the celebration for?"

"The Señor Renaldo Montero eez ver-ry locky man," the bartender informed. "He go ver-ry soon to marry the mos' beautiful Señorita Raquel de Aragon of the Rancho Bonita. Heez friends dreenk for heez good lock. I call Renaldo now and all heez friends for the dreenks."

He turned around to his dark-skinned helper and told him in Span-

ish to go outside and call Montero.

"Good goshawmighty!" Jerry Hope exclaimed dolorously near Dave's ear. "Have we gotta swaller more o' that fire and brimstone?"

"Swaller it and make out it's the best licker you ever put down your goozle, you growling beanpole," Dave warned him. "We're on probation. You help us come up to taw, or we'll have to fight this whole outfit."

Jerry wanted to complain further, but cut short when the bartender, moving with alacrity, a smile on his face, came with a large, square bottle and poured the goblets full in front of the two Texans. Then he went around the bar, pouring drinks for the others. Loud, boisterous talk broke out at that moment in the patio. A half dozen men followed the dark-skinned bartender back through the door beyond the far end of the bar and came swaggering, jabbering as half drunk men do, around to the bar. Added to the dozen Mexicans already at the bar, the place was a little crowded.

An especially boisterous, big man, bareheaded and dressed in resplendent new clothes, came around toward Dave and Jerry.

"Who buys the drinks for Renaldo Montero and his friends?" he loudly demanded in Spanish as he came.

At the corner of the bar he halted, staring at Dave and Jerry. A wide, bright red sash was tied around his big waist, hanging its tassled ends low beside the close-fitting pantaloon of his right leg. His right eye was missing, leaving a raw-looking red hole in its place. The remaining good eye was prominent, like a big bullfrog's eyes. Part of his stubby, flat nose had been torn away by the bullet that had ripped out his eye. A scraggly, bristling black moustache only partly hid his protruding, coarse yellow teeth. The thick lower lip hung down loosely as if long since the muscles had given up in the hopeless task of keeping it up over those snaggled tushes. A long knife was stuck under the sash at his left hip and a big black revolver was in a breast holster under his coatless left arm.

"*Ha, Americanos!*" he exclaimed, glaring at Dave with his one baleful eye, then glanced shortly at the bartender. "Do the pigs understand Spanish, Tony?"

"Perhaps, but they would be your friends," Tony replied anxiously, evidently fearing to miss the sale of so many drinks. "They would drink to your marriage, Renaldo, and wish you much happiness. Here is your glass and mescal from a very special bottle for you."

Dave was tensed, realizing that the moment was crucial. A slight matter could turn the scales toward violence now and perhaps result in death for him and Jerry before the guns of all these touch-and-go men. He glimpsed the trembling hand of the bartender as the latter poured Montero's drink and in the same second he was wondering if he should reveal that he understood and spoke Spanish. Suddenly he made up his mind. With a fraction of an inch to go to meet death, he smiled at the man whom he meant to kill if necessary to save Raquel de Aragon. He then lifted his glass for a toast. Any deception against this cunning, hate-filled enemy was pardonable with life in the balance. In flawless Spanish, he spoke a toast which had another meaning than that understood by Renaldo Montero.

"Much happiness and long life to him who is to wed the beautiful *Señorita de la Rancho Bonita!*" he proclaimed and held his glass toward Montero.

All eyes were upon the staring, surly man with the bared yellow teeth. Other men lifted their glasses in unison with Dave Warner and some of them added: *"Al novio!"* "To the bridegroom!"

Every glass was emptied, but Montero remained motionless, right hand extended to rest limply on the bar, his single eye boring into Dave Warner's face. His face, ugly and loathsome beyond the power of mere words to describe, was inscrutably expressionless except for the gleam of unfriendliness in that eye.

Then as if he were a statue coming to life, Montero caught up his glass and spoke.

"Fill the glasses again," he ordered. "The American pays for the greater privilege of toasting the bride!"

There were shouts of approval from some of the more inebriated down the bar and Dave recognized a note of boisterous glee in the voices. Back of him he heard a smothered, sobbing groan from Jerry Hope as the man behind the bar came with a fresh bottle of mescal to fill the glasses again.

"The durn stuff's makin' me drunk already!" Jerry exclaimed in a low, threatening tone. "Another few swallers and I'll—"

"Shut up!" Dave warned, instantly divining what Jerry was promising to do, for the past had demonstrated that fiery liquor swept away all of Jerry Hope's abundant sense of caution and turned him into a fighting maniac. "Don't drink all of the next one, you bob-tailed tadpole!"

Both bartenders had sprung to the task of filling the twenty odd

glasses on the bar. When the last was filled, Montero lifted his glass and proposed the toast.

"Al mi novia, la Señorita Raquel de Aragon!" he called.

"Al la novia!" Dave Warner qualified and drank half his glassful.

Montero drank all of his liquor and put the glass down without noticing the nuance of Dave Warner's added words to the toast. The bartender was picking up pay for the round of drinks from the money Dave had left lying on the bar. Montero looked at the five-dollar gold coin and the small pile of silver, an avaricious gleam in his eye.

"I will draw the cards with you, American, for the money," he proposed, waving a hand at the change. "Bring a deck of new cards, Tony!" he cried to the bartender without waiting for Dave's consent to the gamble.

There were exclamations of approval from down the length of the bar and some of the sombreroed men moved up closer to watch the play. Dave saw the glitter in more than one pair of dark eyes as they surveyed him triumphantly. It was plain that the crowd wanted these two hated young men bested. Their lust would mount from one rung to another until the cry for blood would be heard here if skillful maneuvering did not prevent it.

Tony brought a new deck of cards and placed them before Montero. The Mexican broke the package and shuffled the cards in front of Dave. The latter never looked around at Jerry Hope, but could feel the near presence of that volatile young fellow just behind his shoulder. Montero asked Dave to cut the cards. Dave made a triple cut with slender, quick-working fingers.

"We draw five cards, one after the other, Americano," Montero declared. "High man wins."

"Wins what?" Dave asked with a significant glance down at the lessened pile of his change on the bar.

"The money there," Montero waved a hand at Dave's money.

"That is my bet," the youth said. "Where's your cover?"

Montero glanced around at the crowding group of Mexicans at his left and laughed. Those who had gambled in the far corner came to join the crowd while Montero spoke again.

"The gringo does not know that money on the bar here belongs to no one," he said loudly and laughed again as he turned back to finish his guffaw in Dave's face. "We gamble for that money there, Americano. If I draw high cards, I take it. If you draw high, it is yours. Draw the first card!"

There was general laughter from the highly pleased men beyond Montero, but Dave heard a low murmur of words snapped out back of him.

"Make him put up, pardner," Jerry Hope gritted out. "Make the skunk lay the cover, 'cause I'm fingerin' two bone handles right now. I'm itchin' to go at 'em!"

For a brief moment after Montero's insulting manner Dave's bristles tickled his neck and he was ready to cast diplomacy to the winds. Now Jerry's reckless words cooled him. He remembered how desperately he wanted to play safe until he could make sure of Raquel de Aragon's happiness. If he gave way to his temper now, he and Jerry had one chance in a hundred to escape alive. If they were killed here, Renaldo Montero would ride to Rancho Bonita and Raquel would be at the mercy of her conscienceless uncle and Pancho Torres. He forced a smile of acquiescence as if he was learning something new and readily agreed to it.

"All right, if it's that way here," he said and drew the top card from the deck, cupping it closely in his hand.

Montero drew then and motioned for Dave to draw again, a continuing light of satisfaction glittering in his protuberant eye, saliva oozing over his flopping lower lip.

Each man filled his hand of five cards, holding them close. Montero seemed pleased with his draw and looked questioningly at Dave.

"What have you?" Dave asked, holding his cards.

"The luck of the bridegroom can't be beaten," Montero boasted and spread his five cards, revealing an ace, two queens, a ten and a seven.

Dave looked again at his cards before his face while Jerry Hope looked over shoulder and grunted with satisfaction. There were two aces, a king, jack an a ten spot. Dave threw the cards on the deck, faces down. Jerry Hope groaned a curse.

"You win," Dave said. "And it's been a pleasant meeting, gentlemen. I hope we shall meet again, Señor Montero, but we must be riding on our journey now, if you will pardon our hurry."

He shoved the six dollars left on the bar over toward Montero and started to go while the triumphant laugh of Montero rang in his ears. Montero cut his laugh short and his ugly face immediately became dark and menacing as he spoke.

"Not yet, Americano!" he cried commandingly, lifting a hand as if to forcibly detain Dave. "It is said that the Americanos are good

gamblers and never poor losers. You certainly have much more money. Come. Draw the cards again for this American gold coin."

He pocketed the silver Dave had pushed over to him, then put the gold coin back on the bar and asked Dave to cover it.

"I'm gonna start sprayin' lead in 'bout two shakes!" Jerry Hope grumbled low back of Dave. "You ain't a-gonna give the devil no more! I'm ready, pardner!"

A moment ago Dave Warner had felt the fiery effects of the mescal, but now the high tension of the situation cooled his brain. Only the arrogant, unbearable attitude of Renaldo Montero fired him with a cold, inflexible resentment. He knew that if he gave in to the insolent fellow's demand now, he would have to give up all the money he carried, or fight in the end, anyway. It was now or a little later, with no alternative.

Dave glanced swiftly at the packed audience of more than twenty men. He could not see their guns, but he knew that they had guns and knives in plentiful supply. Only bold, aggressive and quick action could possibly hope to overcome the enormous odds.

"We are going, Montero," he declared with cold, deliberate enunciation, looking steadily into Montero's glaring eye. "Don't try to stand in our way."

Montero had moved out as if to bar their going. Dave started toward him, at first with a slow step, then with a sudden flicking right arm, he crashed a hard fist with all his strength into Montero's bulging eye a second before the Mexican could pull his gun. The big, one-eyed man emitted a gulping, furious yell as he flung backwards against men behind him.

Two of the men in front dodged the falling, enraged Montero and snatched up guns from their leg holsters. Their guns were just sweeping up to fire point-blank at Dave Warner when two deafening explosions ripped the air just back of Dave's ducking head and the two gun snatchers staggered backward, dropping their guns from suddenly weakened hands.

Dave Warner's guns were out now as he swept the excited, yelling crowd before him with quick glances. He saw a knife swinging in an arc, the thrower aiming it at Jerry Hope a bare second after that fiery fighter had delivered the first lead. Dave snapped up a gun and drove a leaden ball straight for the knife thrower's chest, knocking the would-be killer of Jerry Hope backward against his scrambling, yelling companions.

Almost in the twinkling of an eye, the crowd before the bar dodged and ran for the other end of the bar, some running on out into the patio. The two bartenders had disappeared. Dave looked around the corner to the outside of the bar, searching for Renaldo Montero, but that worthy had picked himself up and disappeared. A gun at the far end of the bar fired at the peering youth. He threw a quick shot in return, then looked up as Jerry's guns blazed and roared above him. Jerry was firing over at the far end of the bar, across the inside and guns popped from over there in return, splintering the bar top in front of Jerry's face.

"Come on, Jerry!" Dave shouted. "Let's get out to our horses before they cut us off!"

"Cut us off, hell!" the thoroughly enraged, reckless cowboy shouted in answer. "Let's clean out the sneakin' devils 'fore we go!"

Dave heard men shouting and running out in the patio and knew that their escape would soon be cut off. He started to seize Jerry's arm and jerk him toward one of the open windows. Then as his hand closed on the cowboy's arm, a gun roared from the far end of the bar and Jerry Hope fell backward as if kicked. He spread out limply on the floor and lay still. Dave saw the quick flow of blood on his friend's left temple.

Red fire blazed in Dave Warner's eyes then. He had holstered one gun, but he drew it now and with both guns in hand, he started for the hidden group of enemies barricaded behind the other end of the bar.

CHAPTER TEN

DOWN IN the San Saba country of south Texas, where the tall grass grows green the year around, Dave Warner and Jerry Hope had been saddle partners since they were big enough to rope the wild, ferocious longhorns. They had worked for the first big cattle ranch established by ex-American citizens of the newly formed Texas Lone Star republic.

Riding to common dangers together, fighting shoulder to shoulder against quick-moving Comanche raiders and swarthy rustlers from across the Rio and scouting for General Taylor in his march to Mexico City, the two youthful Texans had welded their friendship with the fusing fire of hardship and death faced in common. Now that friendship was severed by death inflicted by a hated, unfair enemy. With the agony of that thought driving him madly, Dave Warner moved recklessly on the hidden pack, stepping over dead men as he moved swiftly down in front of the bar.

He wanted only to see Renaldo Montero, the man who had been the first cause in the death of Jerry Hope. For the moment the memory of Raquel de Aragon was blotted out by the flame of battle and red hot hatred; only the fresher, infuriating memory of Jerry Hope falling with a bullet in his head and the near presence of many enemies who would soon kill him, too, drove him on to sell his life at the highest price he could claim.

To run for his horse and make the hopeless dash for life, leaving Jerry Hope's body to be mutilated by these *bandidos* never entered his mind. The only clear thought as he advanced down the bar was to count his remaining shots. He had fired once at the man over whose dead body he had just stepped. There would be eleven deadly round balls left in his two guns. He must make them all count, for when they were gone, he would not have time for the few seconds needed to slip in fresh cylinders.

A dark mop of hair suddenly stuck out around the side of the bar end, ten feet away, and a gun flashed up there to fire at Dave. He stepped lithely aside and fired instantly at that barely visible head and face. Only one glimpse of the man falling out upon the floor in front of him, stretching in a gesture of quick death, and then Dave leaped forward as three other wide-eyed men raised heads and gun-filled

hands above the bar end aimed at him. Sweeping around in a circling attack, he dodged the too quickly fired shots and poured in three rapidly thumbed salvos from his two guns at six stooping, crowding men he found there, jumping aside after each thumbing of hammers, dodging the rain of lead.

Four of those six men before him stumbled and sprawled in contorted shapes on the floor; the two last ones dodged backward toward the door to the patio, firing again at the stooping, weaving apparition which came on inexorably against their excited efforts to stop him. His last salvo of twin flames kicked them backward through the door, deflecting the arm of a knife-thrower who stood just outside that door and aimed a long blade then at the dancing, dodging Texan.

The half thrown knife clattered on the floor in front of Dave as he bounded forward, jumping over the squirming, dying men in his path. He must find Renaldo Montero out in that patio and with the few bullets left in his guns he must blaze his way to vengeance. The knife-thrower had snatched a second flashing blade from his waistband. It zipped past Dave's ear as he bent low and lunged into the doorway. Wildly, with bulging eyes, the man leaped backward into the patio and went down with a bullet from Dave's left-hand gun.

It was then that the infuriated friend of Jerry Hope saw a mad scramble of many sombreroed men trying to get out a gate in the rear wall of the patio. Some had climbed a tree beside the wall, impatient of the jam at the narrow exit, and were now dropping over to the outside. He took a second of time to wonder why they had not attacked him in the rear by coming through the door at the other end of the bar. Wondering thus, he cast a quick glance down the patio toward that other door and saw three inert figures upon the ground there and only then heard the thrilling, gladdening sound of Jerry Hope's yell from that other doorway.

Dave had no time to listen to the very lively voice of Jerry Hope and hear what he was saying so defiantly back there inside at the east side of the bar room. He heard two explosions of Jerry's gun, but his attention was just then glued to a man whom he discovered clinging to the big lower limb of a cottonwood a few steps outside the door. He lifted a gun to knock the man out of that tree, thinking the fellow was hidden there to snipe at him. As his gun came up he recognized the terror-stricken face of the Spaniard who had served the drinks and heard a strained, beseeching voice.

"Please don't keel me, señor!" the man begged, rolling over behind the limb in a vain attempt to hide all his body behind that partial barricade. "I no try to keel you! Please don't shoot me, señor!"

The last of the fleeing men had gone out of the back gate, or over the walls. Dave wanted to go to Jerry Hope, but he wanted just as much as ever to find Montero.

"Come down from there quick, Tony!" he ordered, waving with a gun. "Where is that Montero skunk? Where has he gone?"

Tony hit the ground and came toward Dave waving his arms excitedly as he jabbered fast words.

"He run, señor," he spluttered. "He go to get horse and run to Rancho Bonita, but he tell other mans, his friends, to get the many others who sleep not far away and keel you. He say that just when he run fast away. You and your friend must go fast, ver-ry queeck, señor, or they be many, many mans all around you. I am your friend. They steal my mescal, make me geeve drinks and no pay. Run queeck, señor!"

Dave guessed that the fellow mostly wanted to save his own hide and property here.

"Hey, Dave!" Jerry Hope's wild yell called from inside the bar room. "Where're you? They're tryin' to swipe our broncs!"

"Bam-m-m! Bam-m-m!" came sound of Jerry's guns and then a string of swiftly paced oaths from the freckled cowboy.

"All right, Tony," Dave said hurriedly, turning back into the doorway.

He left the frightened cantina keeper standing over the dead man outside the door and rushed toward Jerry Hope. That very much alive young man was at one of the high, narrow windows in the east wall, leaning through it. He fired at some target outside as Dave reached his side.

"What's going on, Jerry?" Dave cried. "Our horses all right?"

Jerry jumped at the sound of a voice so close to him, saw Dave gladly and shouted as he peered hurriedly out of the window again.

"They been tryin' in swipe our broncs," he bellowed. "I kep' 'em away. Now they're snipin' from that 'dobe yonder and from 'crost the way in front! We cain't get on our broncs with them devils ready to—"

"We gotta do it!" Dave broke him off, running to the next window ten feet away. "Get up into that window and when I holler 'Go!', let's both jump together and get on them horses. There'll

soon be a whole lot more Mexies surrounding us. Ready!"

Both climbed into the narrow, open windows. Jerry did not question the dangerous necessity. He stood up, prepared to jump at Dave's command. He was bareheaded except for his bandanna which he had tied imperfectly, hastily around his wounded head.

"Go!" Dave shouted and leaped out toward the hitchpole where their two horses were nervously pulling about on their hitchropes.

Guns crashed in a fast staccato from not far away, but Dave did not take time to see from whence came the bullets which indistinctly tore the air around his head, zipping too fast to make much sound. A slug of lead glanced whiningly off the hitchpole as he and Jerry ducked under it. They snatched the drop loops of the hitchropes in unison. Both horses were rearing back, terrified by the close, vicious song of bullets.

Dave and Jerry were jerked off their feet and thrown together with jarring collision as their horses, too terrified to mind the pleading voices of their masters, tried to speed away. Dave's feet hit the ground once after he collided with Jerry, holding desperately to his short tie-rope, then with a spring he grasped his saddle horn with right hand. The leaping momentum of his frightened horse threw him up against the animal's side and then he got a leg over and quickly pulled himself into the saddle.

He bent low in the saddle, letting Cannon Ball have his head, and saw Jerry's horse racing in the same direction. A side glance showed the low bending bandaged head of his partner over the saddle on that other horse. Bullets tore the dust of the dry ground in front of them which showed that the Mexicans were now shooting to cripple the horses. They had obviously failed to shoot the horses before, while they could have easily done so at the hitchpole, because they had wished to kill their owners and win the fine-looking racers for themselves.

A bullet ripped at the back of Dave's vest as he glued himself low over his saddle horn. He felt Cannon Ball suddenly spurt with increased fright and knew that a bullet had touched the magnificent beast. They were headed across open ground back of the houses toward the bank of the little river. Coming close to the latter, Jerry yelled.

"Let's bust' crost that crick—ain't much water in it!" he shouted.

For the first time then Dave Warner had time to think of more than getting away from those lead hornets singing past and around

him. Only vaguely had he thought before of why the natives here, ordinarily too lazy and easygoing to build bridges over small, easily fordable streams, had built their rickety pole bridge over this one. He surveyed the sandy strips of bottom in the nearly dry stream bed as their horses rushed toward the sloping shore line. Then the explanation of that seemingly unnecessary bridge flashed across his mind. He jerked up on the bridle reins, bringing Cannon Ball to a plowing halt right on the sandy brink of the stream and shouted to Jerry.

"Stop! That's quicksand!" he cried. "We gotta make the bridge! Come on!"

Jerry pulled up just in time. His horse was farther into the stream bed than Cannon Ball and already had sunk far above his fetlocks into the oozing sand. He sank deeper as he halted under Jerry's sudden pull on reins and then struggled flounderingly back to solid ground.

Dave thought he heard the bark of a rifle among the continuing rattle of pistol fire. A bullet tore a hole in the groove of the padded leather below his saddle horn as he spurred Cannon Ball into a run along the river toward the bridge. His fear of bullets from the smaller fire arms had diminished as they raced toward the river and away, out of close range, but now their enemies had found rifles and the danger would be very real until they got some of the adobe houses between them and the rifle shooters.

The river curved around back of the line of houses and shading cottonwoods. Running crosswise to the line of gunfire, the two harassed riders felt less fear from the poor marksmanship of their enemies. Then they came in sight of a high pole fence barring their way. The fence enclosed a wide space back of one of the largest adobe houses, reaching clear to the edge of the river.

Between the house to which the fence was attached and the center of gunfire the youths recognized the back end of the big general store they had seen as they rode into town. Dave guided their racing horses for the open space between the two buildings to place the long, flat-topped *cajon* between them and the searching, still very dangerous bullets. As he sped along, his eyes on the wide roadway in front of the *cajon,* he saw a horseman shoot across the narrow space of vision between the houses, going at top speed down the road toward the bridge. The man had passed out of sight before Dave remembered the bright red sash and new pantaloons of Renaldo

Montero. The rider's big hat and flying cape had hidden his identity for a moment.

Montero was on his way to Rancho Bonita! Not even his lust for the blood of these two young Americans could hold him from going on his very fatuous hope of winning beautiful Raquel de Aragon for his bride. Or perhaps he feared to neglect the orders of Pancho Torres more than he hated these gringos and Torres had sent him word to ride through the gate of Rancho Bonita early that night. It was now past mid-afternoon and a long ride ahead to the rancho.

As the two youths ran in behind the long, low adobe building, they saw several men running out from their hiding places nearer the cantina, coming down the street toward the *cajon*.

"Let's stop behind the 'dobe and put in new cylinders!" Jerry shouted to Dave, coming close behind him. "My guns are empty!"

Dave knew that his own cylinders were about spent, too. He drew up and snatched his guns. With speeding fingers, he drew out the nearly empty cylinders, shoved them into his pockets and snatched out freshly loaded cylinders. Within a few seconds he and Jerry had snapped two fully loaded six-shot cylinders into their big guns. Renaldo Montero would be over the bridge two hundred yards away by now. Dave started Cannon Ball into a flying run, holding one gun in right hand as he sped out in front of the building.

Running figures dodged in behind nearest available hiding places. The crack of pistols and rifles urged the horses more rapidly on their way. Dave did not take time to fire at their enemies. If he could run this last gauntlet of bullets, it would be infinitely more important to overtake Montero. The bend in the street was but a few jumps away. That fact, and the excitement of those tumbling, fearful gun-handlers behind was the salvation of the two horses and their masters, for the distance was so short that well-aimed shots must surely have stopped the faithful horses, at least.

They swerved around the bend in the crooked street. Peering faces of frightened inhabitants stared at them from adobe homes along the way, but no more bullets came after them. Chickens fluttered, cackling in wild alarm, across the roadway and a scattering herd of goats bleated and ran for safety, their short tails flipping energetically as they went.

Then another turn in the street around the little tree-filled churchyard brought them in sight of the bridge and a loping group of horsemen coming to meet them. By the markings of the sweaty

horses, Dave recognized the half dozen Torres riders who had gone off on the false trail of the two Fremont soldiers a few hours before. He shouted warning to Jerry.

"At 'em, Jerry! Let's give 'em all four guns, but keep going!"

As they closed in head on against the sextet of riders, they saw those riders drawing up suddenly, their horses rearing wildly as the Torres men drew their guns. These latter stared incredulously at the two men whom they must have thought were far away. The leader of the group, riding a milky white horse, lifted his gun straight toward Dave as the latter bore down on him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BIG DARK horse under Dave Warner, plunging in at the white horse and seeing that animal rearing with flailing front feet, reared to join the fight he thought was offered. The two horses screamed loudly and snapped front hoofs viciously at each other. The two riders, jostled violently by the struggles of their mounts, fired at each other in the same instant.

Dave's buckskin vest jerked hard back under his left arm and he felt the burning sting of a bullet. In the wild jumble, with deafening yells of men and exploding guns mixing with the frightened screaming of the colliding horses, Dave scracely saw his opponent drop his gun and fall from the saddle. He was busy for a moment in avoiding the deadly front feet of that white horse. A striking hoof grazed his left knee cap, inflicting painful injury which paralyzed his leg.

He saw Jerry's horse collide with another and knock the Mexican rider out of saddle. Then Jerry was crossing guns, face to face, with a man just on the other side of him. The Mexican's gun either failed to fire, or Jerry beat him to the pressure of trigger, for the cowboy's black gun was the only one of the two leveled weapons to spit flame and lead.

One of the three remaining riders, coming in behind the man Jerry's horse had knocked out of saddle, held up on his reins and leveled a revolver deliberately at Jerry as the latter fired at his comrade. Dave had no time to aim as carefully as that man was aiming at his partner. He snapped a quick shot at him and spurred Cannon Ball into a lunge against the fellow's horse. Either his bullet, or his horse's violent crash against that smaller pony knocked the Mexican out of his saddle.

Dave looked around for the other Torres riders he thought were still in their saddles and saw only one who was hugging close to his saddle horn, fleeing toward town as fast as his horse could go. Two men on foot were jumping about in the dust, frantically trying to escape from the maddened, rearing horses. One excited horse, rearing backwards, stumbled over the prostrate body of a man and fell over on his back, kicking the air.

Seeing that Jerry Hope was looking about for more enemies to bat-

tle with, Dave shouted above the lessening din of trampling horses and yelling men.

"Come on, Jerry! Over the bridge!" he called. *"Come on!"*

He was away from the rising dust cloud of the struggle as he cried his last two words with straining vocal chords. Jerry caught sight of his departing friend and immediately put his horse into a jumping start to follow. The holocaust, so sudden and short, was over, leaving the two dazed, stumbling Mexicans on foot in the dusty road and three of their companions lying dead.

Jerry came on after Dave, twenty yards behind, but yelling a lusty protest.

"Why you run out," he shouted, "when there's still some o' the devils left? Let's finish 'em!"

Dave slowed down before the bridge, letting Jerry catch up even with him.

"Won't you be satisfied with stretching our good luck out till it's 'bout to pop in our faces?" he asked the hot-headed, embattled cowboy. "It won't hold out forever. Look! Your bronc's bleeding on his neck! A bullet's clipped him."

"Yeah, I saw it back by the river when he jerked up from the bullet," Jerry answered as they galloped across the bridge. "It was that rifle one of 'em was shootin', but it ain't a bad hurt. Jest edged his mane a little. There's a long bullet burn on Cannon Ball's rump there where lead singed the hair off."

He pointed back of Dave's saddle. Dave turned and looked at the sign the bullet had left and then remembered the sting of a bullet on his own side. While the two horses loped on, leaving the bridge and town behind them, Dave felt under his shirt and found only a raised welt that was sensitive to the touch, but no moisture of blood was there. His buckskin vest was ripped at the side and two holes were in his shirt, front and back, where the bullet had passed. His left knee pained him where a hoof had grazed it, but as he worked it up and down, he became convinced that it was not broken.

"I just hope our good luck holds for a few hours more," he told Jerry, looking ahead now across the flat plains of the valley. "Yonder goes that cuss, Montero, kicking up dust near to the mesa rim. We gotta ketch 'im, and maybe a pile of them devils back of us will be on our tails 'fore we get outa sight."

"We gotta stop somewhere and reload our cylinders and clean our guns 'fore we do much more skunk tannin'," Jerry declared.

"We'll do that after we lasso that one going yonder," Dave told him and put Cannon Ball into a run. "Come on. He sees us coming and won't let us ketch up out'n a mighty long, hard run."

"He's got two miles on us," Jerry shouted in reply, gazing forward as he increased his speed. "It's gonna durn near kill our broncs, 'cause he sure won't have no mercy on his horse."

"His horse is just a little bony-hipped scrub," Dave replied. "I took its measure when he run by us back in town. He's big and heavy and that'll wear the brute down quick. Besides, the sun's getting low, so the heat won't be so bad on our broncs. We gotta ketch 'im. I'd give Cannon Ball and forty more like 'im for Raquel de Aragon, much as I think of old Cannon Ball, and if that devil, Montero, gets to the rancho ahead of us, we're lost."

"You mean you lose the gal," Jerry jibed.

"I mean— Oh, shut up and ride. How's that skinned onion of yours? It hurting you any?"

"Jest a little tear on my scalp," Jerry explained. "It knocked me out for a little, I guess. When I come to, some o' them greasies was comin' at me through the door clost by. I poured 'em full of lead, then seen you spewin' fire at 'em down the bar. I saw some o' them runnin' for our broncs outside the window is why I couldn't come and help you none. I wish I hadn't left my hat in that stinkhole. The sun's hot."

"It'll soon be cool," Dave comforted, "and by tomorrow you'll either have all the hats you want, or won't need one no more."

"I'll take that brand new one old Montero's wearin' if we ketch 'im —after I delouse it."

"No you won't," Dave objected. "I mean to wear his hat and cape up to the front gate of Rancho Bonita. I know his voice now and I'll make 'em think I'm Montero."

"If you ketch 'im," Jerry qualified.

Fortunately the sunbaked ground was fairly firm. The horses ran swiftly at a steady pace with seemingly little effort. Dave and Jerry went for some time in silence, looking on their back trail from time to time, watching for pursuers.

Montero lost distance to them visibly in the climb up the mesa shoulder, but when he had gone from sight there was a new worry. Jerry feared that the wily Mexican might stop above the rim, behind the first bushes, and bushwhack them, or turn off from the trail and lose himself in the rock breaks and scrub growth.

"He'll not risk stopping to fight us both," Dave declared. "He might turn off the trail if he knows another way down the other side of the mesa to the rancho, but I'm betting that the only way down is the way we come last night."

At the lift in the trail on the brink of the mesa they brought their horses down to a walk to save them from the hard strain. It would lose them time here, but as Montero had forced his pony to run the steep climb, his horse would not be able to sustain the long run across the mesa as well as the Texas horses with their strength and stamina better conserved.

Coming within sight of the mesquite growth where they had met the boy messenger from Raquel de Aragon that morning, they kept a keen lookout for a possible ambush. When they reached the top and saw nothing of Montero behind the filigreed foliage of the mesquite, their quick glances up the trail showed the fleeing horseman stirring up a small cloud of dust far away. They put their horses into a trot and gradually increased the pace until within a hundred yards the animals were again stretching their legs in a long, easy, distance-eating run.

"He's still got 'bout two miles on us," Dave guessed. "It's ten miles to the other side. That means we gotta more'n cover five miles to his four. Let's run a mile or two and see how it looks, then we'll sure 'nough race the slimy coyote if we see we're not gaining fast enough."

At a few hundred yards from the edge of the mesa, where the last view of the valley and Correlitos was to be had, both youths turned in their saddles to have a last look for pursuers. Rather, Dave turned first and Jerry twisted about because his partner had done so. Both exclaimed with worried surprise and turned quickly about forward in their saddles.

"We sure gotta run for it now," Dave asserted grimly. "They got organized pretty quick. How many would you say is in that bunch?"

"Hard to tell at this distance," Jerry howled. "That pile o' dust couldn't be stirred by less'n ten—maybe fifteen horses. And they're hittin' the trail hard, too."

"You remember the Mex lad told us this morning that Torres still had fifteen men able to fight at the rancho," Dave said. "He sent six after us. That leaves nine, or ten, counting him, if the boy was right. With the five men and the three or four boys of the rancho helping us, we might have a good chance if we can get in there and

settle it before these lobos on our trail get in. Let's see what our broncs've got, Jerry. Stretch 'em out!"

The race really began then and the careful good judgment and kindly treatment the Texans had always shown with their two faithful, long-legged mustangs, began to pay good returns. Within a mile they could see that the little dust cloud stirred by Montero was distinctly nearer. For a few seconds at a time the man ahead would disappear behind a sink in the trail, or other temporary obstruction. Always he showed up again on beyond, his pace unbroken.

Dave and Jerry passed the place where they had turned off to camp the night before. It was about half way across the mesa. Montero seemed still to be more than a mile ahead of them, but his pony was rapidly weakening under the long, hard run. Within another mile they could actually see the distance shortening, although their own mounts were breathing and snorting their increasing distress. The sun was hanging on the rim of the world, seeming like an immense ball of pale red fire dancing there on the western horizon.

"If he gets to that narrow crack down the mesa rim 'fore we ketch 'im," Dave proclaimed, "we'll be sunk. He could hide in the mouth of that crack and pick us off, easy."

"He's kickin' and beatin' his bronc ev'ry step or two now," Jerry cried above the hoof beats and saddle creakings, looking keenly at the man ahead. "We oughta ketch 'im in time."

The distance between Montero and his pursuers continued to dwindle rapidly. He was still three-quarters of a mile ahead when the two Texans discovered the troop of pursuers on their own trail, nearly four miles behind. If they could overtake Montero, their fight with him would have to be quickly finished if they wished to reach Rancho Bonita's gate and make headway to a safe settlement there before these other added enemies arrived.

At two miles from the western edge of the mesa there was less than a half mile between Montero's dust cloud and his pursuers. The sun was below the horizon, but dusk would not begin to dim this high tableland for a half hour. A few minutes more of the painful run and both the youths' horses were snorting foam from their nozzles, but Montero was not more than five hundred yards ahead.

The two anxious Texans could see the cleft in the mesa rim straight ahead of Montero and not more than a half mile away. They could see the Mexican's cape flopping violently in the air as the fellow beat his suffering pony unmercifully to force its last ounce of speed. His

heels were constantly stabbing his cruel, long-pronged spurs at the pony's flanks.

Dave and Jerry had not yet inflicted their spurs upon their bravely racing horses, but in desperation now they had to touch the sensitive flanks with the punishing spikes. The animals responded with a faster spurt. They were close enough to that other plodding little horse in front of them to catch the spirit of the race and seemed to realize that they must catch that other runner. Rapidly as the intervening space melted, it seemed that Montero must surely reach the protection of the gorge before his pursuers could reach bullet range of him.

At two hundred yards distance from Montero, with the big rocks above the mouth of the gorge visible only a short distance ahead of him, Jerry Hope drew his right-hand gun and prepared to shoot at the Mexican.

"Don't do it!" Dave shouted at him. "You'd just buzz a harmless bullet past 'im and make his bronc give an inch or two more of speed."

"Hell," Jerry shouted, "he'll be in the hole with a few more jumps. Look!"

There was no need for the last word of command. Dave Warner had his eyes upon Renaldo Montero and saw the poor little horse under him stumble on uncertain legs and go down into a kicking somersault. The Mexican bounced off as the horse flopped over on his side and began struggling to arise. Montero jerked hard on the reins, standing close to the struggling pony. He was on the very brink of the declivity above the pass. He got the pony on its feet and disappeared below the curve of ground while Jerry shouted his disappointment and Dave only bent low, wordless, and spurred Cannon Ball once more. Montero was leading his mount frantically toward the gorge when last seen by the racing Texans fifty yards away.

They slowed their horses' last mad rush as they came near the beginning of the slope above the pass. As soon as they came within sight of the gorge, a gun flamed down there in the deeply shadowed mouth of the pass. The bullet whooshed the air near Dave's head as the crack of the gun sounded in his ears.

"Behind that big rock there!" he shouted to Jerry and drove Cannon Ball to the protection of the high, wide rock behind which they had left their horses the night before during the fight here.

Jerry swooped in behind the screening rock and both youths

jumped from their saddles in the same instant, snatching guns as they peered around the rock's edges.

They couldn't see Montero, for the gorge, deep and narrow, was already darkened. He might be waiting their approach. It would be easy for him to pick them off if they tried to charge directly down on him, yet it would be fatal to their plans if they hesitated here, bluffed by the Mexican, and let him escape to the rancho. Dave thought fast in his frantic anxiety.

"Watch out for him from here!" he cried to Jerry. "I'm gonna run around to the top over the lower end of the pass and see if he's going on out! Keep an eye on our back trail for them other lobos coming back there!"

He ran out before Jerry could object. Montero's gun flamed again from the dark recesses of the gorge, but Dave had leaped in behind other rocks when the bullet zipped off a stony facing over his head and whined away into the sky. He had to jump from one protecting rock to another until he achieved the level ground. Thence he ran around above the cliff wall over the wide, descending approach to the narrow pass.

Knowing by Montero's last shot that the Mexican was still at the upper end of the pass, Dave could not know how long the fellow would remain there. He wanted to see if a man on foot could descend to the lower pass entrance. He circled around and came to the brink over the pass, directly over the upper end, where Montero had been hidden. An immense boulder, smoothed off by countless ages of wind, lay precariously on the edge of the gorge. It was higher than a man's head and seemed to need only a little shove to send it toppling over into the defile.

Dave peered over the brink to see if Montero was where the immense boulder would strike him if he could shove it off. The Mexican was not at the upper end, nor was his horse in sight down under the perpendicular wall of rock. In a frenzy, Dave jerked about and searched the darker pathway to the bottom of the gorge. There he saw Montero astride his jaded pony, urging the animal along, already half way to the lower end, just then turning around a slight bend in the trail.

The youth ran with all his speed to the outer edge of the mesa wall. There he was fifty or sixty feet above the exit from the pass below. Calmly as he could, he awaited the appearance of Montero under him. Almost immediately the big sombreroed fellow came

out into the gathering dusk. Dave had no time or patience to shout warning to the man and try to make him stop under the menace of his down-pointing guns. He aimed at the fleeing man's back, between the shoulders, and fired.

Montero suddenly swayed in the saddle, jerking down over his saddle horn, kicking at his pony. The tired animal made a weak, stumbling jump to respond to the prodding of spurs, then stumbled on a stone and fell. Montero staggered out of the saddle, reaching for his breast gun, his ugly brown face turned up to search for Dave.

The youth on the mesa rim took more deliberate aim now and fired again just as Montero discovered his protruding face and lifted his own gun to fire a snap shot, poorly aimed. Dave's carefully aimed bullet knocked the Mexican down, but Montero turned over on the ground and weakly lifted his gun for another shot. Dave's right-hand gun snapped on a dead cap holder. He snatched his left-hand gun, angry with himself for not having put in fresh cylinders during their long ride.

His next shot toppled Montero over on his back where he lay still. The Mexican's horse had arisen and started to move off toward Rancho Bonita. That gave Dave a new worry. If the animal should, through fright, run now for the rancho and arrive there riderless, with Montero's saddle on him, Torres would be warned and ready to unmask any imposter of Montero at the rancho gate.

He ran back across the mesa top, hearing Jerry Hope's yells as he went. Coming around nearer to his friend, he saw Jerry and heard his words.

"Fer gosh sakes, Dave, hurry!" the freckled cowboy warned. "Them devils are comin' close yonder on our trail!"

Dave looked across the mesa, along the trail, and with a cold chill tickling his spine, he saw a large group of sombreroed men riding hard down upon them from less than a quarter of a mile away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHILE DAVE WARNER ran on toward Jerry and their horses he was disheartened to the point of complete despair. In proportion to the rising pall of despair in his heart, his fury against these close-riding enemies rose to drive him into utter recklessness. His barely achieved victory over Renaldo Montero meant nothing with these men driving him and Jerry up to the front gate of Rancho Bonita.

As the cavalcade of running horsemen came sweeping on with triumphant yells only a few hundred yards away, Dave counted them. There were eleven. Already they saw him and Jerry as the latter pulled the horses around the big rock to the lower side, shouting a question at Dave about Montero.

"Montero's dead at the foot of the mesa," Dave told him, "but that don't mean nothing to us now if we can't stop them devils coming yonder. We gotta fight 'em here, Jerry! Get the horses down through the crack, tie 'em below and scoot back while I pepper them skunks!"

Jerry Hope looked at Dave with one short, quick stare of amazement, his mouth open, but the moment did not allow of time for argument. He was in the habit, after long years of close association with this cooler, quick-thinking young partner, of deferring to Dave's judgment. He jerked on the bridle reins and got the horses to trotting down the steep declivity.

Dave Warner flattened himself against the lower side of the big rock where the horses had stood. He had already slipped fully loaded cylinders into his guns. He lifted those guns calmly and rested them for careful aim along the top of the rock. It was a desperate, foolhardy thing to do, but he was determined to fight these men to a standstill here, or die in the effort. It was either death here, or at Rancho Bonita if he allowed these to pass down into the valley. He never once thought of abandoning Raquel de Aragon to her fate and fleeing with Jerry Hope for their lives.

The advancing riders saw him in the uncertain light of growing dusk as he took his position behind the rock. They came on to within a hundred yards. Then at a shouted command from their leader, they began to spread out to right and left. The leader who had shouted the commands to spread out came straight on, leaning low in

his saddle, watching Dave, a gun in his right hand. They evidently thought it was going to be easy to overwhelm this lone man afoot here.

At fifty yards the leader of the attackers lifted his gun and fired at Dave. As if the shot were a signal, three or four others, riding in from the flanks, fired. Two slugs of lead furrowed the flat top of the big sandstone rock, flipping particles of sandstone dust into Dave's face. The youth waited tensely. He dared not waste any of his few remaining shots on the horses, for that would still leave live men to creep upon him afoot. Only human targets must receive his lead.

At thirty yards he fired with careful aim at the stooping head of the band's leader. The man jerked upward and then slumped limply out of his saddle as the horse turned about, frightened, and crashed into another rider. More lead spattered across the top of his rock and Dave ducked down to the right end, because the nearest riders came over there to his right. He saw a big man bulging up over him, twenty feet away, yelling with crazy bloodlust as he spurred his horse directly at Dave.

The youth fired at the man's chest, then turned both his guns upon two other riders just behind, thumbing quick shots as both men fired at him with guns that wobbled uncertainly above the jostling movement of their horses. The two last men joined the first in sudden relaxation of their saddle positions, then fell from their saddles while their horses whirled about in a terrified effort to retreat from the blazing, roaring guns in front of them. One of the men hit the ground, doubled into a knot, clutching his middle, screaming curses in a gasping voice.

Dave's big, broadbrimmed black hat suddenly flew off his head. He turned quickly in his squatting position and saw a jumble of men and horses bearing menacingly in upon him from the left. One of the horses stumbled on a small rock and plunged forward on his chest, throwing his rider on toward Dave. The man hit the ground and rolled over on his left side, lifting a gun within five feet of Dave. He never got so far as to back the hammer of that gun before Dave's bullet silenced him. Three other riders were trying frantically to halt their horses, or turn them before they ran into the struggling horse that had fallen and was now floundering to his feet.

The three enemies were close upon Dave, two of them trying to aim their revolvers at him while they struggled with their mounts. He had no time for careful aim, but threw quick shots at their bobbing

shapes above the horses. One of the men yelled in a quick cry of pain, dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and turned to flee. The two others flopped over behind their saddles and turned their horses about to follow their companion in flight.

Looking cautiously over the top of the rock, Dave saw a man down beside the fallen leader, apparently just then trying to help the sorely wounded man to get away. Two other men in saddles were moving away out of range, looking back with nervous glances. Dave admired the courage of the man afoot who helped his fallen leader. He waited for him to accomplish his task of mercy, thankful that he had again been so lucky when it seemed ridiculous to expect anything but death. He raised his voice in a shout to the retreating men.

"Will you hombres call it enough?" he shouted. "Will you go on back and leave us two peaceful travelers alone?"

There was no answer from the sullenly silent men in front of him, but Jerry's voice bellowed down the slope back of Dave.

"Hold 'em pardner! I'm a-comin'!"

The lanky cowboy ran, puffing and straining, up to Dave, staring wide-eyed at the dead men visible there in the evening light. A wounded man over beyond the rock was groaning and cursing loudly. The man who was dragging the wounded leader away had seemed reassured when Dave did not shoot him and was less hasty in his efforts. With his reins hooked on one arm, he dragged the wounded man, whose groans reached the ears of the two young Texans, on for fifty yards and then laid him upon the ground near the gathering remainder of the horsemen.

"Good gosh!" Jerry Hope was exclaiming. "Did you do all this by yourself, Dave?"

"Just good luck," Dave replied grimly, "and a lot of durn foolish ways of attack from them fellers. They're cooking up a better scheme of attack out there now. You get the horses safe to the bottom?"

"Yeah. Tied to a craggy rock down there. Let's toss some more lead at 'em," Jerry suggested, lifting his guns above the rock. "That'll decide 'em to vamoose from here."

"No," Dave vetoed. "I've got a better idea. They're good and sore right now. Our bullets wouldn't more'n get under their scaly hides at this distance. 'Fore they make up their minds to sneak up on them walls of rock surrounding us, I'm gonna stopper that narrow crack down there so they can't get through on their horses and follow us, then we'll skedaddle on our way. They'll be taking care of their

wounded fellers for a while, then maybe some of 'em will find another way down later, but by that time we'll either have the rancho cleaned up, or be in salt. You stand here and be ready to keep 'em away from coming too close while I skin 'round on top again."

He prepared to move away, stooping to go toward the north side.

"What you gonna do?" Jerry asked, his voice high with curiosity.

"See that big rock hanging up on the edge yonder, over the crack of the pass?" he asked, pointing toward the teetering big boulder he had found up there while scouting above Montero. "Well, I'm gonna see if I can shove it off and block the pass for horses. You just keep them skunks offa me while I'm doing it, then we'll climb over the big pebble and be gone."

"Hot skeeter!" Jerry exclaimed, gazing wonderingly at the big rock hanging up there, clearly visible between them and the still bright twilight of the western sky. "I sure hope you can do it, pardner. Maybe you'll need my help to shoulder it over."

"No, I won't," Dave answered quickly with emphasis. "You keep them Mexies at a respectful distance, or they'd corner us up there and we'd be cooked. Watch 'em!"

He was gone, stooping and running in a detour down the declivity, out of sight of the Mexicans until he came to the north wall, or bluff of rock. Then he followed the wall up the slope again until it gradually disappeared into the top of the mesa, where he straightened up and ran around toward the balancing boulder. The Mexicans saw him then and a sudden burst of loud talk broke from them as some pointed toward Dave.

A moment later, before Dave Warner reached the big boulder, three of the horsemen rode out toward the north, obviously intending to circle around, away from the guns of the other American they could see at the rock where Dave had done such havoc to their forces. Jerry Hope saw the maneuver and ran boldly across to a smaller rock near the disappearing end of the north wall. Dropping down beside the rock, he fired a shot of warning at the three horsemen. They swerved off farther, but continued in a wider circle, as if still determined to get around to the very rim edge of the mesa and come upon Dave.

Then there was a wild burst of yells from the men who had remained near their wounded leader. Jerry Hope saw them pointing toward Dave Warner and the big boulder above the gorge. Jerry looked around quickly and was just in time to see the enormous rock

tumbling over the brink into the gorge. It fell to the bottom with a great screeching of rock on rock. The three horsemen circling around to the north set up a chorus of yells then and flailed their horses into a run toward the mesa rim. Dave Warner was running back now, but the three circling riders reined their horses in to intercept him before he could return to cover.

A man who has ridden the cowboy life for as many years as Dave Warner had, is not a fit candidate for any footracing contests. Dave was long-legged and lithe of body, but his leg muscles had been trained to clench tightly to a horse's body, not to run. Nevertheless, Dave had a great deal of incentive then to run faster than he had ever thought he could. There was no alternative. One of his guns was empty and the other had only a shot or two left. With three armed men bearing down upon him with deadly intent and no obstructions behind which he could take refuge, he simply ran with only one objective: Getting down into that gorge and over the fallen boulder with Jerry Hope.

Jerry was yelling wildly to Dave to run faster as the latter cut around the bend of the hill wall about the entrance to the pass. Dave saw two of the horsemen out in front, beside the wounded leader, start their horses straight toward the pass mouth as if to join their three circling friends in a renewed attack. Then Jerry's guns were popping. The freckled cowboy was throwing lead at the running riders as they swerved in toward Dave, firing at the latter.

One of the cowboy's bullets must have struck a horse, for one of the animals suddenly threw up his head and whirled, crashing into one of the others. This threw two of the riders into temporary confusion, but the third man came on after Dave, shooting again and again. Jerry thought surely his friend would be brought down on the very edge of safety. The anxious cowboy blazed away with a volley from both guns at the chasing horseman, but evidently missed the stooping figure in the saddle.

Dave did not come on to the end of the wall, where it merged with the level ground, but made a flying leap down where it was five or six feet to the hard ground below. He landed on both feet, but stumbled a few steps. He whirled about, heading down toward the gorge, shouting to Jerry.

"Come on, Jerry! Let's get going!"

The two riders coming in from the outer trail were close to the beginning of the slope now and were already firing at the running

youths as Jerry turned about to follow Dave. Bullets from the lone gunman on the north side spattered off the scattered rocks on beyond Jerry. He leaped in after Dave behind the last big rock on the slope before the mouth of the pass, and kept going with momentum which threatened to crush them both against the big boulder now blocking the downward trail.

Dave, being in the lead in their jumping descent, smashed up against the enormous rounded rock first and then bounced back into Jerry Hope's arms. A bullet spanked against the boulder in front of the young Texans' faces as they saw in the twinkling of an eye that the rounded big rock so completely filled the pass between the narrow walls that they could not get by it, not even with a tight squeeze. The curving top was too high for one man to climb over alone because of the absence of handholds with which to pull upward and over.

The three Mexicans were off their horses now and running for closer positions, from which to pick off the Texans. One of them fired again as he ran down the slope and the bullet whizzed past the close-crowding partners' ears, splashing into a flattened cake of hot lead on the rock close to their faces.

"Let's turn back and fight 'em, the dirty, snipin' devils!" Jerry Hope belligerently proposed, looking wildly back toward their enemies.

"No," Dave cried. "My guns are about empty! We gotta get over this rock if we can make it 'fore they—here, boost me up! Then I'll pull you up! Hurry! They're close—stand close to the side here! Now, boost!"

Jerry Hope bent his long body down in a quick, fear-driven movement, caught Dave's left foot with his hands that still held his guns, and heaved away. It was darker here in the narrow chasm, but the down-rushing Mexicans could undoubtedly see them as they struggled swiftly there against the big boulder. In another ten seconds the Texans' fate had to be decided. It was a matter of whether they could get over that big rock quicker than the men behind them could get close enough for sure, killing shots.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN THE RUSH and excitement of battle after his hat was shot from his head during the first attack by the Mexicans, Dave had not taken time to recover the hat. It was perhaps fortunate for him that he had left it behind, for its jet black color and large size would have shown up clearer in the growing darkness than his more neutrally colored clothing, thus showing him up for more effective shots from the men rushing toward him and Jerry.

In the darkness of the chasm the attackers could only see the merest outlines of movement by the two youths at the big rock. Dave flung himself around on the big, rounded top of the boulder rock and reached a hand down for Jerry. The lanky cowboy below jerked so hard on that hand in his effort to climb up the rounded stone surface that he almost pulled Dave off on him.

They struggled in frenzied haste near the north wall of the chasm, where the boulder was jammed tightly against the jagged stone facing. Bullets continued to sing glancingly off the boulder near them and one smashed the rock so near their clasping hands that it stung their fingers and wrists with the burst of rock particles and splinters splattered around by the impact of the bullet.

Jerry was nearly to the top when Dave glanced toward the oncoming Mexicans and saw the leading one twenty feet away. With every atom of his strength and weight behind the movement, he snatched backward as Jerry's body came up over the top, knees against the stone. He shot over the other side, sliding swiftly toward the ground, pulling Jerry headlong after him. Jerry let out a loud cry as his feet slipped over the top. He jerked those feet around in a spasmodic, sudden effort.

Dave's feet hit the ground hard and he staggered wildly for a moment as Jerry slid flounderingly down upon him. He still gripped Jerry's hand, which enabled him to keep the cowboy from falling head foremost to the narrow, rocky trail. Jerry tried to swing his feet around to land on his boots, but failed, and slouched down to the ground.

"They got me in the right foot, I guess," he cried as if in pain. "My whole right foot and leg is numb! I cain't feel the ground under that foot."

He was struggling to arise as he spoke and was awkwardly trying out his right foot.

"If you can't run on it," Dave said hurriedly, "climb on my back —I'll tote you!"

"It don't pain me none," Jerry replied, catching hold of Dave's right shoulder. "Lead on—see 'f I can hobble along."

They started off, Jerry clinging to Dave, limping as they trotted down the steep, narrow trail. Shouts of chagrin resounded above the blocking boulder, mixing loud curses with hurried suggestions in Spanish about getting over the barrier to continue the pursuit.

Jerry seemed to get better control of his paralyzed right leg as they trotted, stumblingly, down the dark chasm. Reaching the lower entrance to the pass, Jerry pointed to the dark shapes of their horses where they stood hitched to the up-jutting points of a big rock.

"Let's have a look at that foot first," Dave ordered. "How does it feel now?"

"Still don't hurt none," Jerry told him, "and I'm gettin' a lot more feelin' in it all the time."

He sat down on the ground and pulled off his right boot, feeling gingerly of his foot, running his exploring hand all over the bottom of the foot and up his leg.

"By granny!" he exclaimed, "I don't feel no blood and there sure ain't no hurt! My foot was so numb it was plumb dead back up there, but it's good as new now. A bullet musta glanced off the leather over my ankle and—here!"

He had taken up his boot to put it on again and was feeling of it.

"I'll be a mouthin', dehorned old steer!" he cried. "Gettin' crippled by a bullet that ain't never touched my hide! A bullet buried itself in the heel o' my boot. I feel the hole—see it?" He held the boot heel up for Dave to look. "Gosh durned if it didn't feel like a cannon ball had tore my leg off. What a kick!"

Dave felt greatly relieved that his friend was not crippled. Immediately his thoughts turned to their still very pressing problems of action.

"Come on—get the boot on quick," he cried. "Them lobos are li'ble to be over that rock after us pretty quick. Watch the mouth of the pass while I rob that Montero skunk of his hat and cape."

He rushed away toward the spot where he had seen Montero drop under his bullets. The Mexican lay there already cold in death. Feeling a nausea created by his robbing the dead as much as by the thought

of having to wear the loathsome fellow's clothing, he picked up the big, peaked, brand new hat from the ground near the body and put it on his head testingly. It was a little small, but by pulling it down hard it would stay on long enough to serve his purpose at the gate of Rancho Bonita. His task of taking off the Mexican's cape was more unpleasant. He had to roll the body about to get the garment and then found the latter soaked in two big spots with drying blood. However, that stain would not show in the dark.

He put the cape over his shoulders, took Montero's gun, ammunition and two knives and went back to Jerry. He found the cowboy standing with the horses, watching the shadows at the mouth of the pass. They mounted and started the rested horses off at a trot.

"Now we come to the ticklish part," Jerry said. "Or have you come to your senses about tacklin' that Pancho feller and his bunch at the rancho?"

"After all the good luck we've had so far," Dave answered, "it'd be like spitting in that nice lady Good Luck's face not to go on when the end is so near. Torres can't have over six or seven men with him that'll fight us."

"Only six or seven!" Jerry exclaimed. "Jest 'cause you've been lucky this far, you figger six, or seven raw meat eaters ain't nothin' to go up ag'in, hunh?"

"Wasn't so far back along the trail when you hollered to stop and do some more raw meat eating, yourself, Jerry," Dave reminded him. "What's happened? That bullet in your boot heel knock all your nerve outa you?"

"Get on, quit your horsein'!" Jerry replied heatedly. "I jest got the smell o' powder outa my nose ag'in, I guess, and I like to smell good, sweet air for a change."

"Yeah, and we gotta stop soon's we find Montero's horse and put some more powder and balls in our empty cylinders and clean out barrels good. We gonna need 'em plenty 'fore this night gets gray whiskers."

It was already dark in the valley, with the faintest line of disappearing twilight above the jagged line of mountains far out in the west.

"Why we gotta find Montero's horse?" Jerry asked, riding close.

"He ran off toward the rancho," Dave explained. "I hope we ketch 'im 'fore he gets to the rancho. They'd know Montero's saddle, most likely. That'd spoil my plans. He'll probably head for the

corrals up there if he's been there before, being hungry and dried out with thirst."

"Hadn't we better stop first and 'tend to our cylinders and guns?" Jerry suggested. "We might run into some o' them Torres polecats out here, or them fellers behind might get down after us."

"I've just put in my last full load cylinders," Dave replied. "How many full ones you got left?"

"Jest two. I'll swap 'em now for my empty ones."

Jerry changed his cylinders in the two guns while they rode. Dave looked in every direction as far as he could see under the gray light of the stars, searching for the riderless, saddled pony he had last seen heading up the valley trail toward the rancho.

Neither youth spoke of the rising swell of anticipation as they rode ever nearer to Rancho Bonita and the unpredictable problem they would face there. Added to that increasing tension in Dave's mind was the worry over that straying pony. If it—

He shut his mind against the unpleasant likelihood that the telltale pony and saddle were already at the rancho and their identity established by Pancho Torres. Onward they went, walking their tired horses, but surely, slowly cutting down the three miles from the pass to the gate of Rancho Bonita.

Finally, when half the distance to the rancho lay behind them, Dave stopped and dismounted to examine the trail. He made no light to use in search for fresh tracks going toward the north. In the soft, churned dust of the trail he found tracks of horses going in the direction of the rancho, but by feeling of them with his hand, he knew they had been made long before the last sun had dried them with its heat. None had the fresh, cool feel of hoof tracks made since the sun had set that evening.

Then he remembered that the exhausted pony of Montero's would have been so thirsty it would have gone to the first water its nostrils had smelled here in the valley. The little running stream which he and Jerry had followed down to the rancho from the mountains was marked by its scattered line of cottonwoods and willows over to the westward, indistinctly seen in the starlight.

"Let's cut over to the crick," Dave told Jerry. "We might find that little scrub of a mustang after water there."

"If he's waterin' at the crick," Jerry objected, "he won't be in our way at the rancho. I'm all set for hell. Let's go on and get it over with."

"Yeah, but the critter might just possibly come moping up to the gate there while we're presenting ourselves, 'fore we get in," Dave argued. "Can't take no chances on that. Besides, we gotta reload our empty cylinders and clean our gun barrels. They'll be so caked with burnt powder soot after all the shooting we've done today that they'd get jammed bullets 'fore many more shots. I don't know how good Montero's gun is, and don't want to have to use it. Come on."

He turned off toward the stream and Jerry followed, grumbling. Coming near to the stream, they disturbed sleeping cattle that were bedded on the grassy ground near water. Some of the cattle sprang to their feet and ran like the wild longhorns Dave and Jerry had often chased in southwest Texas, but the bedded animals were too scattered to start a noisy stampede. However, the noise their rattling hoofs made was sufficient to worry Dave.

They rode up the east side of the line of trees, going on to the rancho. More cattle stirred from their beds, but there was no sign of a horse with empty saddle.

At last the two riders came within sight of the trees and considerable cluster of buildings of Rancho Bonita. It was a half mile yet to the rancho, but the youths decided that they could not approach nearer before stopping to care for their guns and empty cylinders. They dismounted along the low ground near the stream and let their horses rest while they cleaned their gun barrels and put fresh charges of powder and ball in the empty cylinders, tamping new caps upon the cap tubes. They also cleaned the captured Montero gun and reloaded three spent chambers of its cylinder. Montero had carried no extra cylinder, but he had a fair supply of caps, powder and balls for the gun in the ammunition pouch Dave had taken from him.

"We might get a chance to slip this to some of Racquel's supporters 'mongst them rancho vaqueros 'fore the trouble starts," Dave said while handling Montero's gun. "Maybe they could use it."

"They'll make better use o' them two knives," Jerry added, then suddenly twisted about, seizing Dave's arm while he looked intently up along the line of trees beside the stream. "Hey, Dave, that ain't no cow comin' yonder! It's a man on horseback!"

Dave studied the moving shape of horse and rider for a short moment.

"Let 'im come on—say nothing—don't move," he advised, speaking little above a whisper. "We may have to down 'im if it's a Torres snooper!"

"They'd hear our shootin' clean to the rancho," Jerry warned.

"We'd have to risk that," Dave declared. "Let's get on our broncs so if he sees who we are and tries to make a run for it, we can ketch 'im."

They mounted while the night rider came on slowly toward them, obviously aware of their presence now, but studying them cautiously. At twenty yards he spoke.

"*Quien son ustedes?* Who are you?" he asked in good Spanish.

"Renaldo Montero and a compadre," Dave replied and Jerry Hope jerked around in his saddle to look in astonishment toward his partner. The voice and pronunciation were amazingly like Montero's which Jerry had heard in Correlitos.

"Oh, Señor Renaldo!" the rider exclaimed as he urged his horse on toward the tensed, waiting youths. "Señor Pancho and Don Alfredo await you at Rancho Bonita."

Dave started Cannon Ball to meet the man, gripping his gun to use as a club on the fellow's head.

"Who are you?" he demanded, coming close to the man and seeing that he wore no weapons about his simple dress of shirt and trousers. "Are you Torres man, or *vaquero* for Rancho Bonita?"

Dave had stopped his mount beside the man and felt sure as he spoke that the unarmed man was not a Torres gunman *bandido,* but he would take no chances. He still gripped his drawn gun under the edge of his disguising cape.

"I am only the humble *vaquero,* señor," the fellow answered with visible trepidation. "You would not hurt me, I beg you. My eyes do not lie. You are the *Americanos,* friends of our beloved Señorita Raquel, but you spoke with the voice of that son of Satan, Renaldo Montero, and deceived me."

"What has happened at the rancho?" Dave asked anxiously. "Is the *señorita* safe? Do they expect us?"

"The *señorita* is a prisoner in her room, *señor,*" the *vaquero* replied. "Her panterito has been taken from her and tied up in a prison of his own, without food and water since last night, for they expect you and your friend, but not in this way. They sent men to bring you back so that Pancho Torres might have vengeance for the men of his you killed last night. They mean to put the hungry panther in a darkened room with you and listen, with many laughs, while the hungry beast tears you and your friend to pieces."

Jerry Hope emitted a long groan of misery on hearing that.

"Gosh, Dave," he declared fervently, "we sure cain't let 'em take us now. I ain't never got over the last scare a old pant'er give me down in Texas that time two years back when he near 'bout knocked me off my bronc a-jumpin' down on us outa that tree."

"This one's tame," Dave told him. "Maybe— But they haven't got us yet," he added with little comfort, after hesitating, then addressed the *vaquero* again. "They're expecting Montero at the front gate tonight, aren't they?"

"Yes, *señor,*" the man replied, fear in his voice, "but when the boy, Jimmy, came with your message and told Señorita Raquel, she begged us, when we took her food to the room, to look out for you and tell you to not come as you promised Jimmy you would come. It will be such a terrible death for you, *señor,* for Pancho Torres has eight men with many guns and knives and we poor people of the rancho have none. We cannot fight them, but must be humble slaves to them if we want to live. The *señorita* sends a message of her eternal gratitude to the Señor Dave Wanner and begs him to go far away, out of danger, then when the American law comes here with its full strength, you may come back to see her if you wish."

"That would be too late, *amigo,*" Dave said grimly. "Do you know that the *señorita* intends to kill herself rather than marry that devil, Pancho?"

"We can only hope for the help of the holy saints, *señor,*" the man said humbly.

"All right, *amigo,*" Dave told him, "and we're two messengers of the holy saints and we're sure coming with a heap of thunder and lightning to the rancho right soon. Will you people of the rancho fight with us for the *señorita* if I give you a gun, some ammunition and knives?"

"*Si, señor,*" the *vaquero* declared with new spirit, less sad humility in his voice. "If we have weapons with which to fight for the *señorita,* we would gladly face death for her."

Dave untied the gun of Montero and its accompanying pouch of ammunition from his saddle and handed them across to the Mexican. Then he gave the fellow Montero's two knives.

"That will arm three of you," he told the Mexican. "Now let's give him our own knives and our wood-choppers, Jerry," he added in English to Jerry. "We won't need them no more if we lose in this scrap."

Jerry gave up his knife and the hatchet tied to his cantle and added

them to Dave's own in the *vaquero's* arms.

"Andale, amigo," Dave told the Mexican. "Hurry back to the rancho and get your friends ready for our coming. We shall be at the front gate soon. Maybe we can get a handle on things so there won't be any fighting, but if fighting starts, you people do what you can to help."

The *vaquero* expressed profuse gratitude and rode away with his armful of weapons, going up along the shadowed line of the stream under the trees. When he had gone out of sight, Dave and Jerry started toward the rancho buildings. After riding two hundred yards they saw a horse coming out from the river across the prairie, heading for the rancho. They turned over toward the animal, but as they approached it, the horse lifted its head and began to trot, apparently unwilling to be overtaken. Then Dave saw the empty saddle on the animal's back.

"Shades of Davy Crockett!" he exclaimed excitedly. "It's Montero's mustang, Jerry, and headed for the rancho! Lookit 'im go! For gosh sakes, get around that way, ahead of 'im, Jerry, while I run in behind and try to rope 'im!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TOUGH little Mexican mustang had apparently recovered its strength very well after slaking its thirst in the stream, for it began to run now when Dave spurred Cannon Ball in pursuit. At first it ran straight toward the rancho buildings, having no doubt been often fed and cared for there, or perhaps taken from the rancho's herd by Torres.

Jerry circled to head the running horse off from its course toward the ranch buildings. The frightened animal snorted loudly, its head high in order to keep the dangling bridle reins from underfoot, and ran with increasing speed. The shadowy outlines of the houses at the ranch establishment loomed up less than a quarter of a mile off when Jerry finally forced the running pony to swerve back toward the river.

Dave Warner had unwound his lasso rope as Cannon Ball cut in close behind the running horse. When close enough to see clearly for a cast, Dave swung the rope over his shoulders and threw it for the plain target of the uplifted head. The flying circlet of rope settled neatly around the mustang's neck. Dave drew back on his reins and Cannon Ball stopped suddenly, plowing the ground with his feet, bracing for the pull he was trained to expect.

That pull came with shocking force as the half wild little horse in front lunged fiercely against the restraining rope, sprang high in the air, screaming in fury, and fell backwards. Dave was sure that almost human cry of rage from the animal would attract attention from listening ears of Torres henchmen at the rancho. He leaped from his saddle, leaving Cannon Ball braced against the pull of the rope, and ran to the captured mustang. The little beast had scrambled to its feet as Dave approached. It was meek and trembling.

Jerry rode up while Dave worked with frantic haste to remove the saddle.

"Hurry, Dave!" he cried in suppressed anxiety, "they's somebody comin' 'crost from the houses yonder, a-ridin'—two o' them!"

Dave snatched the uncinched saddle off and dropped it to the ground, then with speedy hands unfastened the bridle and threw it after the saddle. He led the mustang toward Cannon Ball for a step or two, loosening his lass rope. He slipped this from the pony's neck, letting the animal go free in a swift run toward the river.

Dave ran toward Cannon Ball, winding up his lass rope as he went. A swift glance backward showed the two approaching horsemen coming within thirty steps. Jerry was trotting his horse back toward the trail, eastward. Dave tied his rope to saddle with feverishly working hands and swung astride, ready to face the other riders. Jerry turned his horse around and stood a short distance away so that he would be obliquely opposite the two men from Dave.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" one of the strange riders asked in arrogant, commanding voice, speaking in Spanish.

Dave could see that they were dressed much more fully than the *vaquero* had been, and also that they wore guns in hip holsters.

"Renaldo Montero," Dave answered. "I change to a fresh horse and ride to Rancho Bonita and my bride." He was ready to swap lead with these men, almost certain that they would see through his deception if they knew Montero well.

An ugly, sarcastic laugh broke from both of the horsemen at once. They stood their horses twenty feet from Dave.

"Go on, then, fool Renaldo," one of them ceased his laughter to say. "You would refuse to recognize old friends because your head is very big, thinking to marry a fine lady. Go on to her and maybe you will let us have some of the dregs of the fine wine at your fiesta."

Again the two laughed, this time with greater hilarity. Dave Warner only wanted to avoid a clash here which would almost certainly prevent his easy entrance through the rancho gate. He spoke no further, but whirled Cannon Ball to go.

"Isn't that the black horse of the *Americanos?*" Dave heard one of the men ask the other.

"Unless there are two horses in this country exactly alike," the other man answered. "And he has left a saddle on the ground—"

Dave was gone too far to hear the rest. He knew that these two scouts of Torres would soon discover the identity of Montero's saddle. Before they did that and came after him with warning to the gate guards, he wanted to get inside Rancho Bonita. He galloped with Jerry Hope on toward the ranch houses, his blood tingling from the accelerated beat of his heart. With tremendous effort he sought to control his excited nerves. When they came up to the high front wall and the wide, barred gate of the Rancho Bonita, he had mastered himself. His hands and voice were steady with assurance. Jerry Hope, whatever his feelings and misgivings, said nothing. Perhaps, as always before, the actual, known presence of danger and prospect

of battle found him ready and more than willing to enjoy the anticipated strife.

A man spoke challengingly from within the gate as the two youths drew up their galloping horses just outside.

"Who is it?" the guard asked.

"Renaldo Montero, come for his bride," Dave replied without hesitation, even forcing a tone of arrogance into his imitation of Montero's voice. "Open!"

"But you were to come alone to enter this gate, Renaldo," the gatekeeper parried. "He who rides with you must not enter. Perhaps he would try to enter first and win your prize."

"He will enter after me, but I shall be first, therefore open at once, *hombre!*" Dave commanded.

Even as the irons of the big, swinging gate grated and started to give way before the two tensed, anxious Texans, there were sounds of swiftly running horses and the distant cries of men from out upon the prairie. The two men had at last discovered the astounding truth, or were so definitely suspicious that they came at breakneck speed now to bring warning to Pancho Torres. There were indefinable sounds within the big, wide-spreading mansion as if voices spoke excitedly in there, and other sounds seemed to roll up over the wide, flat top of the structure, coming from the rear.

Dave forced Cannon Ball through while the gate was yet only half open. The gateman started to shove the heavy barrier back to keep Jerry Hope out, but that decisive young man ignored the move and barged through on a prancing horse that flinched from pricking spurs. The gateman was almost knocked down by the forcible entrance. Jerry wanted to plant a heavy gun upon the dodging man's head, but Dave had not given any intimation that hostilities should begin so early, therefore the impatient cowboy had to restrain his urgent wish to open the fight here.

There were plentiful lights in the house, showing in every one of the high, narrow front windows clear across to the far west end. Lights were also in the east room of the top floor, where Raquel de Aragon was held a prisoner in her room, according to the boy, Jimmy, and the *vaquero*.

Dave found himself on a wide pathway leading from the big gate up to the front entrance of the house, twenty steps ahead of him. The big yard to his right, in front of and east of the house was bare as he had seen during the previous night, but the larger yard to his left was

filled with what appeared to be flowers and much desert shrubbery. Over against the high yard wall there was what he guessed to be a long grapevine arbor. He took in all this with one sweeping, quick glance before he dismounted.

The gateman was shutting and bolting the gate, playing safe against those shouting horsemen coming so fast toward the house out there. Dave spanked Cannon Ball and sent him trotting off into the open ground to the right. Jerry Hope had dropped from saddle an instant after Dave and now made his mount follow Cannon Ball.

The gate guard came curiously toward them. He was a short, broad man, with a big, high-crowned hat that seemed to reach as high above his face as his face was above the ground. Dave stepped around to the other side of the man, putting him between Jerry Hope and himself. He had a gun in his right hand under his disguising cape and now shoved it against the guard's back.

"Forward, *hombre!*" he commanded in low voice. "Into the house and announce us to Don Alfredo! *Andale!*"

He jabbed the gun muzzle forcefully against the flinching back of the man for emphasis.

"*Si, señor!*" the man cried in sudden fear. "Don Alfredo and Pancho await you inside. You have no reason to use the gun if you are Renaldo Montero, but are you—"

"Shut up!" Dave jabbed him again. "Go on! Open that front door!"

The riders came yelling very close outside now, but their excited cries drowned one another out and made them unintelligible for the moment. While Dave drove the gate guard on toward the front door to the big ranch mansion, he took a gun and a knife from the fellow's belt, sticking them under his own belt.

They came before the two steps leading up to the wide, closed door of the house. When almost ready to put feet upon the steps, the three men, two Texans and their trembling captive, looked up to see the door suddenly swing back and a little man, dressed in the finest regalia of a Spanish grandee, stood there before them with only reflected light in the hallway back of him. His big nose immediately identified him to Dave Warner in spite of the poor light.

"Who are you? Is it Renaldo Montero?" Alfredo de Aragon demanded, trying to see the faces of the two strangers before him.

"You sent for Renaldo Montero to come and claim a beautiful

bride," Dave replied, shading his face with his big hat against the reflected light of the interior, speaking still in imitation of Montero's voice. "I have come to claim the bride."

"But who is the other man, Renaldo?" de Aragon asked in a puzzled tone, gazing toward Jerry Hope, who stood aside in deeper shadow.

"A compadre who always rides with me," Dave told truthfully.

"Then come in at once, and welcome to Rancho Bonita," de Aragon agreed affably, even effusively, although he did not bow as he stood back invitingly.

Dave shoved the gatekeeper back and gave him a contemptuous boost with his knee in signal to be gone. The fellow ran away past the corner of the house. The two shouting riders outside were going on around the east side of the outer wall, riding furiously and filling the air with strained yells as they headed for some rear entrance. Alfredo de Aragon did not take time to listen to those men's garbled cries, evidently accustomed to having the Torres followers cut up capers like that around his place.

Still shading his face with his big sombrero and hiding his clothes with the cape taken from Montero, Dave stepped quickly inside, with Jerry Hope treading closely on his heels. De Aragon turned to lead the way ahead of the two youths, going down the hallway toward a wide, portiered, arched doorway to the left, where light was filtered through the innumerable beaded strings of the portieres from the room. On the opposite side of the hallway was a closed door. A light far out at the back of the house, seen through the long hallway, revealed a covered veranda there and several men sitting about a table, eating.

Alfredo de Aragon parted the stringy, glistening portieres and led the two young Texans into a large, luxuriously furnished room where three separate candelabra with a dozen candles each lighted the interior brilliantly. Dave Warner still held his right-hand gun ready under his cape. He glanced hastily about the big room, which was obviously the reception salon. He saw the bulking form of Pancho Torres coming toward them from one of the high windows at the left. No one else was visible in the room, but there were numerous pieces of furniture behind which men could be hidden.

Torres fixed squinted, keen dark eyes upon the two young men in the moment when Dave stepped through and saw him. De Aragon was speaking then.

"He has come, Pancho," he said, a note of satisfaction in his voice. "Now we can—"

"Caramba!" Torres exploded, his squinted eyes suddenly opening wide as he caught sight of Jerry Hope and his bandaged head. *"Americanos!* They are the accursed *Americanos,* Alfredo!"

As he spoke the last words, he moved backwards a step and his hand started for the holstered gun that was fastened close to his belt on right hip. Dave's gun slid out from under the cape and pointed with deadly menace at the big Mexican's middle.

"Leave the gun alone, Pancho!" he snapped. "We can settle this affair without more killing if you have sense—that is, provided Don Alfredo is a man of honor and keeps his sworn promise." Then he added in English to Jerry Hope, "Watch the Don, Jerry!"

He removed the big hat and threw it in the corner, then snatched the cape from off his shoulders and cast it against the wall. Alfredo de Aragon stood gaping at Dave, his dark eyes gradually changing from blank amazement to a more sinister, gleaming flame of silent rage. He swallowed, wobbling his little head forward in the effort, like a chicken swallowing a large grain of corn.

"Why have you come here?" he finally blurted at Dave.

"Now watch the big moustache over there, Jerry," Dave said, while I pow-wow with the peewee here," then went on in Spanish, addressing de Aragon, "We met your fine *caballero,* Renaldo Montero, Don Alfredo, and he very obligingly told us of your delightful plan to marry him off to your beautiful niece if he would ride through your gate tonight. I persuaded Renaldo to let me ride through the gate, instead. You made an oath, a solemn and most honorable one, to make your niece marry the first man to come through that front gate tonight. I am that first man to come. I claim the bride, the most gracious and lovely Señorita Raquel de Aragon. Does Don Alfredo honor his pledged word?"

"You cursed he-goat!" Pancho Torres burst out in a wild rage, barely restraining his twitching hands, aware of Jerry's menacing guns, "you gringo dog! You dare to think—"

De Aragon's little effeminate hand lifted in a quieting gesture toward Torres, stemming the violent flow of words, while a new light of well simulated friendliness shone from his eyes upon Dave. The youth saw the glitter of cunning calculation behind the surface warmth of those little black eyes and wondered what new scheme was hatching in his cunning brain.

"Hold your harsh words, Pancho," he said suavely, "and show the respect which great courage deserves. This young man, though he be an American, is brave and comes honorably to claim his rights. I admire his unequaled courage. No gentleman of the Aragon family has ever broken his word, nor failed to keep his oath. I made an oath that my niece, because of her rebellion against my lawful authority, should marry the first man to enter that front gate tonight. Perhaps my oath was made in a moment of rash temper; nevertheless, it must be kept. This young man shall marry my niece, Raquel de Aragon, at once, Pancho."

He glanced toward the big, dark man. The right side of his face was hidden from Dave. A signal wink of his right eye might have conveyed a message to Pancho Torres, for the *bandido* leader seemed to relax from his swelling resentment which had risen like a threatening storm while de Aragon spoke.

De Aragon was about to speak further, all smiles now, when thundering feet of more than one running man came from the rear veranda along the extensive hallway. Dave Warner moved beyond the doorway to the hall and signaled Jerry to do the same. Both young men took their positions there, guns still held in their hands, aware that they sat figuratively upon a powder keg which might explode at any flashing spark.

Two sombreroed men brushed through the portieres, one close behind the other. They came shouting something about Renaldo Montero having been murdered. Dave knew at once that they were the two riders he and Jerry had evaded out on the prairie. More steps of heavily treading men came along the hallway after these two. Dave did not want the room filled with enemies, in spite of the apparent submission of Alfredo de Aragon. He knew well that Pancho Torres would seize any advantage to wipe out him and Jerry.

"Order your men to stay out—to go on back to the rear, Torres," he ordered, waving his gun at Torres, his gesture and his squinted gray eyes full of menacing promise. "Do it quick before my finger gets itchy."

Torres made an ugly grimace, but spoke quickly as if he were about to choke.

"Go back, you men!" he shouted hoarsely. "Back to the patio —stay out of here!"

"But Pancho," the advance man of the two who had just entered the room cried, "these two gringoes have murdered Renaldo Mon-

tero. We found Renaldo's saddle and bridle just after they turned the horse loose."

Dave kept his eyes busy watching Torres and these two armed men at the door. He heard the other footsteps out in the hallway receding slowly toward the rear as if the men out there were going reluctantly. Torres glanced down at the hat and cape Dave had discarded, a renewed cloud of darkening hatred in his face. Alfredo de Aragon's glance followed that of Torres. The latter stepped toward the cape and picked it up.

"That's the cape of Montero," the spokesman of the two men in the doorway asserted, vociferously, "the new cape and the new hat he bought for his wedding. I saw them but yesterday in Correlitos when he bought them after I carried him your message. These cowardly gringoes murdered Renaldo and robbed him of his clothes!"

Torres held up the cape, turning it about in his hands, and silently showed the big spots of dried blood to de Aragon, who stood away, looking on with obvious worry.

"They not only killed my men yesterday, Alfredo," Torres spoke with scarcely restrained fury, "but they have waylaid and murdered Renaldo. They should die for their crime! They come with the arrogance of all the gringo bred to claim a pure woman while their hands are red with murder!"

"Are your own dirty hands clean now of the many murders you have committed, Torres?" Dave asked coldly, in a slow, quiet tone. "You tried to overtake and murder me and my friend last night. We defended ourselves. Renaldo and his friends in Correlitos tried again to murder us. We defended ourselves and killed many of your dogs over there today, but Renaldo ran out of the fight to come here. The six men you sent to bring us back for torture tried to take us at the bridge in Correlitos. We killed three of them and sent the others away, glad that they still lived. We followed Renaldo and many others followed us. At the pass where you tried so bravely from behind a rock to murder us last night, we defended ourselves against the eleven who came after us, and killed many of them and there we killed Renaldo Montero, too, after he tried to murder us from ambush. We have never murdered any one, Pancho Torres. We have killed many of your murderers in defense of our lives."

While he spoke, he saw the swell of blinding rage growing constantly more out of control in the big bandit leader. He knew that the man was on the verge of risking a draw for a decision on the spot.

It was his determination to force that draw. If he could kill Torres now and these two men of his, if they mixed in the fight, the matter would be settled with perhaps only a little further battle against the remaining, leaderless men outside. Would Torres draw? He waited, on edge, and saw that Jerry Hope stood a little distance to his right, tensed and ready.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT SOON became evident to Dave Warner that Pancho Torres was not going to risk his life. Perhaps the big bandit overlord was thinking of the astounding story Dave had just told about the many fights he and his silent, grim-faced partner had been through that day and all the men they had killed in battle. Dave became impatient when the dark face of his chief enemy showed no sign of threatening intentions.

One of the two men in the portiered doorway moved cautiously as if to spring back out of the room. Dave saw the slight movement and turned his guns to bear upon the two men.

"Come in, nearer, *hombres!*" he ordered. "Come nearer and put up your hands! Step quickly!"

Alfredo de Aragon made an audible sound of swallowing again to wet his dried throat, his widened eyes staring about at the dangerously charged situation. He wore no gun on his foppish Spanish costume, having left off the gun he had worn the evening before on his left hip.

The two sombreroed men came slowly, reluctantly forward, their hands held shoulder-high, their big spurs dragging clinkingly on the flagstone floor. When they were almost in line with Torres in front of Dave, the latter spoke to Jerry in English.

"Dehorn 'em, Jerry. Take their guns and knives."

Jerry holstered his guns and proceeded expertly to the task. He took the men's weapons and tossed them in a big chair. Then Dave ordered him to disarm Pancho Torres, but he did not command Torres to lift his hands at once. He still hoped the silent, maddened man would go for his gun. Jerry walked around back of the two disarmed men and approached Pancho Torres from the side, leaving Dave plenty of space for action should such be called for. When he approached Torres, Dave spoke.

"All right, Torres. Put up your hands and turn your back to my partner. *Up with your hands!*"

Torres had looked nervously sideways at Jerry, his hands twitching. He was plainly measuring his chances of grabbing the lanky cowboy for a shield. He glanced back at Dave with glowering eyes and then downward at the two threatening muzzles of Dave's guns. He turned his glance then upon Alfredo de Aragon and shot a load

of contempt at that fearful little man while he slowly turned his back to Jerry and lifted his hands half-heartedly. He was quickly stripped of his gun and the long knife that hung in a sheath from his belt in front. Jerry came back and added these to his pile of guns and knives in the big, cushioned chair in the corner.

"Now, Pancho," Dave went on, "you and your men will be very glad, I'm sure, to leave Rancho Bonita and never come back. You will gather what are left of your *bandidos* in Correlitos and leave Aragon land. If we ever catch you in this country again, you won't find us so generous in letting you off easy next time. Are you going?"

Torres looked venomously at the quaking figure of de Aragon and there was a plain question in his blazing eyes, though he did not speak. De Aragon weakly shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture with his hands, indicating helplessness.

"I know, Pancho," he said in a resigned voice, "I am much in your debt and you have rightful claims here, but perhaps it is better that you go now. Maybe this young man will listen to your claims later."

"He has no claims here, Don Alfredo," Dave put in coolly, "except your personal gambling debts, or other personal obligations of yours. You will pay no more debts at the expense of Señorita Raquel. Pancho Torres will be a very fortunate man to leave this country with his life. Perhaps we should hold him prisoner until he pays for all the cattle and other property he has stolen from Rancho Bonita and until the American law looks into the murders he has committed here."

"Well, now, young man," de Aragon spoke hurriedly and with quickly rising anxiety, "please let Pancho go peaceably. We have had enough trouble. If you will let me speak privately with him a moment, I am sure he will agree to take his men and leave at once. May I?"

Dave did not wish to grant the request, for he felt sure that Alfredo de Aragon was capable of any cunning and deception, but if he could once get Torres and his men outside the walls of the rancho and arm the faithful people of the rancho to fight for their young mistress, he would be vastly nearer to victory. As long as the several other Torres men outside were still armed and within the walls, there was imminent danger of hostilities in which the outcome was doubtful. At any moment some of those men from the rear could sneak up to those open windows around this room and fire upon him and Jerry. He had been aware of that danger and had kept a constant

watch on those windows with quick glances.

"All right, Don Alfredo," he agreed after a short silence, "speak to him and send him on his way. No," he thought of something else, "first call the boy, Jimmy. Call him in here now."

De Aragon looked at Torres, questioning doubt in his face, then glanced at Dave in surrender and stepped toward the hall door.

"Don't run out, Don Alfredo," Dave warned. "Stand in the door there and call the boy from the back."

De Aragon did as directed. He stood near the portieres and called loudly, directing his voice back along the long passageway to the rear. From somewhere, far out in the rear of the house, voices stirred into noisy volume, then quieted and a boy's voice replied to the call. A moment later, while de Aragon stood in silent waiting by the portieres, bare feet came running along the hall, spanking on the stone flagging.

"Si, señor," Jimmy said, coming timidly through the portieres.

De Aragon, looking darkly down at the boy, waved a hand toward Dave. The boy looked at the young Texan with a sudden, spontaneous expression of delight, his white teeth showing in a large grin.

"Come here, Jimmy," Dave commanded.

The boy came to him and Dave whispered in his ear for several seconds while the boy nodded energetically. The little brown lad whispered something to Dave and then, while Torres and de Aragon and the two silent, disarmed followers of Torres looked on with helpless fury in their faces, he went to the chair where Jerry had piled the captured weapons and picked them up, stacking them carefully in his arms. He turned about, without further words, and rushed back whence he had come.

Dave stood silent, watching the men before him. Jerry was over by the wall, beyond the doorway, waiting contentedly on his capable partner. Alfredo de Aragon seemed to be standing on a bed of needle points, torn by some great anxiety.

"Now, may we not go and let Pancho get his men away?" de Aragon implored Dave, rubbing his hands together in a panicky hurry to get going.

"Just a minute, Don Alfredo," Dave advised. "We have plenty time."

There were loud outcries from the rear of the house then, a dozen voices raised in angry imprecations and one was ordering the boy to stop. Then hasty, heavy steps came along the hallway, accompanied

by shouted words to Torres.

"Oye, Pancho!" the runner called ahead, "the boy is taking guns and knives to the *vaquero* goats. He went past us—we could not stop him!"

"Stay out of here!" Pancho bellowed angrily. "Go back to the other men and tell them—"

"Hold it, Pancho!" Dave snapped, lifting his guns at the raging bandit leader, "one more word as to what they do and you die where you are! Now, listen to me, *hombre*. We will go now. You and Don Alfredo can talk as you go just ahead of me. Your two men here can go just ahead of you, but don't any of you try to run, or lead will catch you. We will go out to where your men were piling in the food a minute ago back there. You will get them all in front of us and then we will see you and them go out that back gate. The *vaqueros* and boys have guns and knives. Between us we'll cut you lobos to little pieces if you make one foolish move. Get going!"

He herded the four men into the hallway and toward the back, de Aragon and Torres walking gingerly just in front of him, feeling his menacing guns close to their backs. Jerry brought up the rear, guns in hands. The Torres man who had come shouting along the hallway backed away ahead of the strangely silent men, trying to see enough in the weak light of one candle in the hall to comprehend what was happening. He finally bawled a question at Torres and before he had time to get an answer he saw the two men behind with guns bearing upon his leader and the others.

He turned to flee, shouting to the others in the rear.

"Torres," Dave snapped, "you better order your men to be quiet and good, or you'll feel hot lead in your back at the first hostile move they make!"

Torres shouted to his men who were stirring excitedly in the rear patio, some leaning over into the veranda to look forward. Dave ordered a halt where the hallway ended at the covered veranda. The latter extended around three sides of the patio out there, forming a large square with an open north end. Out across this open north end, Dave could see the quarters of the servants and *vaqueros* made of one-story adobes. A clustering group of people stood out there in the light of a bonfire and in the hands of the men in the group and some of the boys were to be seen guns and knives. Five men stood tensed and expectant beside the veranda edge, watching Dave and his prisoners.

Alfredo de Aragon was speaking hurriedly in whispers to Torres, who stooped to listen.

"Where are your horses, Torres?" Dave asked not waiting for de Aragon to finish his secret talk.

Torres lifted his head and glared back at Dave, then stooped again and whispered something hurriedly to de Aragon. Dave was angered by the man's insolent ignoring of his question and by the secret conference which he knew boded no good for him and Jerry. He shoved the muzzle of a gun into the bandit leader's back.

"I asked you where are your horses, Pancho!" he grated.

Torres straightened up with a jerk.

"Outside in the corrals," he answered thickly. "We will go now, *Americano*. Perhaps some day, very soon, we shall have the pleasure of meeting again."

"Not if you like good health for yourself, Torres," Dave replied. "Corral your lobos ahead of you out there and get going toward that back gate."

Torres spoke to his five men in the patio, ordering them to go ahead. Slowly, uncertainly, the five turned about and started away. They could and did undoubtedly see the group of rancho retainers out by the bonfire, standing there with weapons in their hands. Dave made his disarmed prisoners walk faster now and follow the five leading men out of the patio and across the wide yard toward the north gate where the night guard had come out searching for him on the previous night. Jerry Hope followed, always close and ready to help his friend.

One of the men in the lead unbarred the big, swinging rear gate. Dave touched Alfredo de Aragon and motioned for him to drop out. He shoved Pancho Torres after his hurriedly departing men through the gate and then pulled the gate quickly shut, barring it.

"Be sure you take only your own horses, Torres," he shouted over the wall, "and just one horse to a man. I'll be watching from the wall top. If you try to take more, I'll talk to you with lead."

There was a quick storm of jabbering voices outside and then sound of running feet as Torres called his men on after him toward the corrals east of the houses. Dave ran across the yard and climbed the tree which he had used the night before. Jerry climbed up after him and they sat in the shadow of the overhanging limbs to watch the going of the furious, defeated bandit band.

"You reckon it's all over?" Jerry asked Dave, doubt implied in

his tone. "It seems too easy. Maybe we oughta finished the devils while we had a chance."

"They wouldn't open up and give us an excuse, Jerry," Dave said with regret. "I tried to make old Pancho start the dance, but he was too modest. We couldn't start in to shooting the skunks out'n they drawed first and if we'd kept 'em here as prisoners, what'd we a done with 'em? Old Don Alfredo mighta found a way to slip 'em loose later and get the drop on us. Maybe they've had enough now, and will clean out."

They waited there atop the wall and saw eight men ride away from the horse corrals, north of the cow corrals. The riders did not come past them as Dave had expected. He thought they would want to head for Correlitos and their depleted band of comrades over there, but to his surprise and worry, they turned back to the northeast and rode toward the mountains whence he and Jerry had come the day before. He wondered if they would go to wreak vengeance on the helpless old woman, Conchita.

Relaxing now, Dave thought of Raquel de Aragon, a new and delicious thrill of anticipation coursing through his body. He swung over to a tree limb and dropped to the ground, followed by Jerry. They started toward the house and saw their horses standing by the wall not far away, munching grass that grew there.

"Jerry," Dave turned to his friend, "will you find the boy, Jimmy, and the *vaqueros* and ask them to put up our horses right here in the yard? Unsaddle them here, feed and water them in the yard, so we'll have them close for emergencies. I'd help you, pardner, but I gotta see Raquel. Do it?"

"Sure, pardner," Jerry agreed, but added a snort of displeasure, "go on and eat your moonshine, but soon's I get our broncs fixed for the night, I'm gonna holler for some real food and plenty of it. Then I guess I could do with a soft, clean bed and about forty hours o' sweet by-by for a change. If you're gonna marry the gal and be boss here, I mean to start right in livin' off the fat o' the land."

"Who said that?" Dave asked, bristling. "Raquel hasn't said she'd marry me, but I'm going to see her right now and also give her uncle a little hell for the way he's treated her and her pet panther. And don't forget that we gotta keep a watch for that pile of polecats. They'll be back, for they went away cooking up some devilment. A mighty little sleep and rest you're gonna get for quite a spell yet."

"Oh, why didn't we bust 'em while we had a chance?" Jerry

moaned as he went toward the horses.

Dave looked up at Raquel's room window and heard voices there. He listened and recognized the girl's voice raised in considerable agitation and heard the angry tones of her uncle. He sped around toward the patio, on his way to the girl for whom he had turned aside the well-planned course of his life.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN DAVE ran around into the patio and stepped upon the veranda, he saw that the ranch employees were engaged in an impromptu celebration, dancing and singing around the bonfire. Some of them spied him as he turned the corner and immediately broke into a bedlam of cheers and glad cries. Some of them started toward him and he heard them shouting above the "Bravos!" of the others, begging him to come and speak to them.

Dave was anxious not to offend these simple people by refusing to stop and speak with them, but he was more anxious right then to see Raquel de Aragon and know what was going on between her and her uncle. He waved to the men coming toward him.

"I will be back to see you, *amigos,*" he shouted. "I must first go in the house to see the *señorita. Unos momentos!*"

He rushed away into the hallway and sped toward the front, looking for the stairway leading above. He almost ran past it in the poorly lighted hallway, on his right as he went forward. He had been so intent upon his prisoners when he came out that way that he had not seen the dark stairs. He rushed up, two steps at a time, turning around at a half way landing and leaped onward to the upper hall.

A sheaf of light in that hall lighted his way. He glanced after the light and saw that it came from the open doorway of a room at the north end. He turned toward the south end and the sound of voices, going swiftly. The voices ceased speaking at sound of his first steps in the hallway. Alfredo de Aragon came briskly through a door down there, the door which Dave surmised would be that of Raquel's room. De Aragon pulled the door shut after him, turned a key in it and put the key in his pocket.

He came to meet Dave, a peculiar smile on his face, a smile that made Dave want to smash his fist into the man's big nose, because it was such a forced, artificial caricature of a smile. Dave noted that de Aragon had belted on his gun over his dandified Spanish sash and black velvet breeches.

"Why are you keeping Señorita Raquel locked in her room, Don Alfredo?" Dave asked, threatening impatience in his voice and his stance as he blocked the man's way.

De Aragon continued his vacuous smile, but he spoke with a quiet

simulation of dignity in which Dave detected a quiver of uncertainty.

"Señor Dave Warner," he said with a slight bow of his head. "I am truly grateful to you and your friend for your brave help in ridding Rancho Bonita of unwelcome oppressors. Believe me when I tell you that I am gratified, indeed, to send Pancho Torres and his vultures on their way, for they have kept me and my niece slaves to fear for many days. I feel sure that you are of far different character to Pancho Torres and that you will not claim a greater reward for your services is just.

"If you and your friend will enjoy my humble hospitality for the night, I shall send men with you tomorrow to see you safely on your way to your destination and I shall be glad to pay you well for what you have done, although our stock of gold is—"

"Hold it, Don Alfredo!" Dave interrupted, tired of the long speech. "Give me that key and quit jabbering about rewarding us. We've got our reward in the pleasure of killing skunks that oughtn't ever been born. *Give me that key!*"

He held out his hand and spoke harshly when de Aragon held back, his face clouding, the smile gone.

"Now, my dear man," de Aragon protested, "perhaps you don't know the customs of our country, although you speak Spanish very well. You should know that young, unmarried girls in our country—"

"In what country?" Dave shouted in English, out of patience completely. "This is United States country now, Don Alfredo. Drop that pretense and give me that key before I tear your britches off you and take it!"

"*Oh, madre de Dios!*" de Aragon murmured weakly, his face paling there in the light streaming past from back of Dave. "You are such a—a—violent man." His hand sought tremblingly in his pocket and he finally brought forth the key. "Here it is, but I will open the door for you and see if my niece will—"

"Give me that key!" Dave ordered through gritting teeth and seized the trembling hand that held the key.

He snatched the key out of the palsied fingers of the man's little, bloodless hand.

"Now," he said, turning toward the girl's door, "you may hang around, if you like, and see that I am a perfectly proper visitor with Miss Raquel, but you don't keep her door key any more unless she gives it to you, little uncle."

He unlocked the door and shoved it inward. The sight that greeted his eyes sent icy chills spinning along his spine; his blood seemed to halt in his veins; his heart bulged into his throat, choking him.

Raquel de Aragon, dressed in a light blue robe over white silken gown, lay on her side in the middle of the floor there within her large room, her mass of raven black hair disarrayed, covering her face and shoulders. She seemed dead, her arms limply outstretched over her head. A pale blue bedroom slipper was on one foot; the other dainty, white foot was bare, its slipper lying nearby.

Dave Warner turned his face slowly, black, silent rage in his eyes, as he fixed de Aragon with a fiercely questioning look. He wanted to leap into the room and gather Raquel into his arms, for he believed her uncle had murdered her in a fit of rage, but he dared not leave the man armed behind him. De Aragon started to shrink back before the furious young man towering over him like a hurricane cloud, but as he started to wilt backwards, strong hands shot out and seized him. Before he realized what was happening, his holstered gun was snatched from him and he was shoved backward into the corner of the room with such violence that he tumbled over twice before he came up, dazed, against the far wall.

Dave Warner pulled the door closed and locked it, then rushed to Raquel de Aragon. She weakly moved a hand as he fell on his knees and reached feverish, but tenderly moving hands under her shoulders. He lifted her in his arms then, seeing signs of life. He stood up, holding the girl in his arms while he looked about for her bed, then glanced toward de Aragon where that terrified little man was slowly picking himself up in the corner.

"Get some cold water, quick, Don Alfredo!" he ordered. "Be quick, I say!"

He carried Raquel to her bed, at the head of which a four-bracer brass candelabra gave generous light. There he laid her on the disturbed bed covers where she had already been lying before and reading, judging by the book which lay open on the back side of the bed.

Alfredo de Aragon was nervously pouring water at a mahogany dresser on the north side of the room, bumping a tattoo on the water basin with the pitcher because of his shaking hands.

Dave ran across the room, snatched a towel from the dresser, threw it in the basin of water and sped with this back to the bedside, dousing the towel to soak it while he went. Again Raquel was weakly

moving her hands and one little foot twitched on the bed covers. The anxious youth wrung out the towel and spread it on her face and forehead, rubbing it off gently.

The girl gasped for breath, but weakly, then opened her eyes. De Aragon came meekly over to stand at a little distance from Dave and waited, with nervously clasping and unclasping hands, watching his niece's face.

"Raquel!" Dave cried, leaning, tensed, above her and looking into her hazy, vacant eyes. "Raquel, darling! Speak to me!"

It seemed to Dave in that moment that he had known Raquel de Aragon all his life, that he had always loved her. A great fear that something had happened to take her away from him now tore at his mind and made him wild with a frenzy he had never known before. He glimpsed Alfredo de Aragon standing near and turned blazing eyes upon the fearful man.

"Don Alfredo," he cried with choking voice, "if you've hurt Raquel, if you've killed her, I'll tear you apart, you infernal, two-faced, damned hypocrite!"

He had spoken in English because of his great agitation, but de Aragon understood and shrank back as he spoke protestingly in a weak voice.

"I did not touch her," he cried with an effort. "She was all right when I locked the door. I give you my word of honor—. There she is well! She will tell you that I did not hurt her in any way!"

He pointed a trembling finger at the girl and Dave snapped his attention back to her. She was looking up at him, her eyes wide and clear now, a great joy beaming in them. Color was ebbing back into her face. Her arms reached up to clasp around his neck as he bent down and spoke to her.

"Raquel! Darling! Are you all right? What happened? Did you just faint, or did some one hurt you?"

"Oh, Dave Warner!" she pulled his head down and pressed his cheek against hers as she spoke his name with strangely tender emphasis. "I thought they had killed you! Uncle Alfredo told me as he went out the door and locked me in again, that you had been killed and that he must keep my door locked against the danger of those terrible men coming after me. Dave, I am so happy now, but I just lost all feeling and sight of everything when I thought you were dead."

Dave removed her arms from about his neck and stood up, facing

de Aragon, a white hot anger forcing out of his mind all other emotions.

"Why did you lie to her, Don Alfredo?" he demanded. "So that explains why you wanted to keep me from seeing her. You lied to her and you expected to get me away from here without ever letting her know how you lied! You poor old fool, to think you could keep me from the girl I've— Ugh!" he caught himself with a gesture of disgust, almost on the brink of confessing in Raquel's presence concerning the many men he had killed for her.

He bent down and gathered Raquel in his arms and there before her cowering, crestfallen uncle, he kissed her passionately on her lips and brought rosy color to them again where they had recently been so pale like death had claimed her. She spread her white hands on his dark hair and gently caressed the back of his head in the ecstasy of his fervent, hot kisses.

He lifted his head finally, his face bright with his great happiness as he spoke to her.

"Listen, Raquel," he said. "I rode through the gate tonight as I promised you I would do. I was the first to ride through. Don Alfredo must keep his oath and give you to me—that is, if you agree. Will you, girl? Will you marry me, a wandering, penniless cowboy from Texas, but the best cowboy and the—"

She laughed a happy, musical laugh and put up a hand to cover his mouth while she interrupted his pleading.

"I will marry you, Dave Warner," she told him, "just as soon as the padre can be brought here, for Rancho Bonita needs the best cowboy that ever came out of Texas and I need the bravest man I have ever seen, for I love him. But where is Pancho Torres? What did happen downstairs? Has he left here, or did you—"

"He has gone, sweetheart," Dave told her, "and I'm hoping he will be wise and keep going and never show himself in this country again. Whatever claims he has against your uncle will have to be settled between them, if Don Alfredo won't let us settle them for him in the only way Torres will accept, and that is with plenty of burning lead."

He looked around to find Alfredo de Aragon sitting slumped down and woebegone in a chair near by, his chin on his chest, his face hidden.

"How about it, Don Alfredo?" Dave asked the miserable old man. "Do you agree to our marriage as soon as the padre can come? Will you keep your oath?"

De Aragon lifted a face toward the young people that was a picture of all the pent up wrath in the universe, but that picture flashed at them only as he lifted his face and then was gone like the darting tongue of a rattler. He struggled to smile at them, but it was a wan, sickly smile.

"I shall keep my promise," he said, making a half-hearted gesture with the two hands that hung limply on the arms of the chair. "After a hundred and fifty years the great Aragon grant shall pass to another name." He arose and there seemed greater strength and assurance in his movements now. "But I trust you will carry on the high traditions of the family, Señor Warner, and let your descendants never forget their proud Aragon heritage."

He stood over them a moment, looking down toward them, but there was a vacancy in his stare that seemed to show he did not look at them. His thoughts were upon other things. He held out his hand.

"Now that you know I did not harm Raquel," he said, "I wish you would return my pistol. There may be dangers yet to be faced by us in common here and I shall need the weapon."

Dave was still on his knees beside the bed and started to hand the gun to the man over him. Suddenly changing his mind, he arose, took the gun from under his belt and shoved it down into de Aragon's holster. Then, looking levelly into the older man's eyes, he asked:

"Why did you tell Raquel that I was killed, Don Alfredo?"

"Oh, I suppose I was a very obstinate old man," de Aragon said, humbly enough. "I hoped that you might go on and never see her again, for I did not know that you two already loved each other. I thought you had done what you did here just because you loved fighting and killing and I did not want my niece to marry such a man. I feared that you would try to hold me to my foolish oath, not honorably, but because you wanted to possess yourself of the Aragon lands. Now it is different. I shall go and leave you two, since you are betrothed. I will order food prepared for you and your friend."

"Wait, Uncle Alfredo," Raquel called, arising to the side of the bed, searching with her feet for her slippers. "Where is *Panterito?* Please send him back to me."

De Aragon was obviously embarrassed by her request. He looked at her with a sad shake of his head.

"My dear," he told her sorrowfully, "Pancho Torres lost patience

with the panther because of its unruly temper. He shot and killed the animal."

"Oh!" Raquel de Aragon cried out and sat back upon the edge of the bed, burying her face in both hands. "My poor *Panterito!* My poor *Panterito!*"

She sobbed in her grief. Dave sat down on the side of the bed to comfort her. Alfredo de Aragon went out of the room, leaving the door open. The girl quickly stifled her sobs and dried her tears. She looked up at Dave Warner, but there was no smile on her face. Her eyes flashed as she opened her clenched jaws to speak.

"Dave," she said, "if Pancho Torres ever comes back in here and you have to fight and kill him, tell him if you can that you are killing him for the murder of a helpless little panther, the dearest pet I ever had. I know they had Panterito tied and helpless. They tortured him and then killed him for spite against me, because as long as he was with me, no one of them dared to molest me. I hate Pancho Torres more than ever. Hate is a sin, but I cannot help it."

"You are beautiful when you hate so strongly, that way, sweetheart," he declared gravely. "Hating or laughing, happy or sad, you are the sweetest, prettiest little woman I've ever seen."

He arose and pulled her up into his arms. For a long moment he held her close and kissed her lips, then he turned suddenly away from her, shamed by the fire of his turbulent feelings.

"I will go and let you dress," he said, walking toward the door. "You will dress and come down to eat with us, won't you?"

She ran after him, a vague fear showing in her dark, brilliant eyes. She caught his arms and spoke close to his ears in a whisper, while her eyes furtively watched the door.

"Dave, darling," she whispered, "I don't know how to tell you. I wish that I could trust Uncle Alfredo, but he is so awfully different from my father. I know him so well. I have seen him say one thing and mean another so often that I felt a shiver run over me when he sat in that chair and talked, then when he stood over us. The look on his face— Oh, Dave, please don't stop your watchfulness. Are you sure that Pancho Torres has gone far away? Are you sure he won't come back?"

"The ranch help are all armed now," Dave told her, "and with the gates fastened and some of the help on guard, I guess we can feel safe for the present. Torres may try for some vengeance when he's gathered enough of his men to attack us here, but his gang is

pretty badly busted right now. We must be ready for him when he busts loose again."

He left her then, but knew that her fears were not allayed. Neither were his own, but he went down the stairs looking for Jerry Hope, glad that he still had that dependable, gunslinging cowboy as his partner, even if he was forever predicting the worst sort of calamities.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WANDERING through the large rooms of the wide-spreading, palatial house, viewing luxury that he had never before seen in the crude, pioneering life of the young Texas Republic, Dave Warner passed through the spacious living room where he had disarmed his enemies, and on through a wide door in the northwest corner. This doorway, of double, swinging doors, had been closed when he was first in the living room, but it was now open and Dave saw a long dining room beyond, with an ornately carved mahogany table, above which a partially lighted candelabra hung.

A fat young mestizo woman was setting dishes of food on the dining table as Dave entered. She curtsied to him, her dark, round face brilliant with an admiring smile.

"Food for you and your friend, *señor,*" she explained.

"Thank you," Dave said, "and have you seen a long, walking bean pole with a freckled face that looks like a man's face? He is my partner and may need some hot water to dress a wound."

"Oh, si, señor," the woman replied, laughing until her round, fat body shook. "He is now in the kitchen and my sister is washing his wounded head."

"If your sister is as pretty as you," Dave flattered her, "my partner will need cold water poured on his head instead of the hot kind."

He left the delighted young woman rocking with laughter and went on back through the door she had indicated. The kitchen took up the entire left rear wing of the house, with work tables and food shelves along the sides, innumerable utensils hanging on the walls and a wide, high cooking fireplace at the rear end with hooks and pots and other paraphernalia at hand.

Jerry Hope sat on a stool beside a table. A comely young woman, younger and slenderer than the waitress, was just then wrapping white strips of cloth around the cowboy's head. Another woman was busying herself at the fireplace, stirring cooking food in a big, suspended pot.

"Man alive!" Jerry Hope exclaimed, looking up at Dave with a broad grin on his tanned, freckled face, "ain't that smell o' beans and b'ilin' meat good to your nozzle! And I got the best nurse in the world right here. You ain't the only locoed Tejano sayin' good-bye

to dreams o' California, pardner."

The girl wielding the bandages could not understand Jerry's English, but when he added to his compliment a grinning glance up into her face, she understood enough to giggle, well pleased.

Dave had expected to find Alfredo de Aragon and was worried over what the slippery man was doing. He looked anxiously at Jerry.

"You seen Don Alfredo out here since you come in?" he asked.

"He come and give some orders about our chuck, then faded out," Jerry answered. "He carried a gun on the hip and he ain't packin' any too much love for us, seein' the way he burnt me with them squint eyes o' his'n."

Dave went out to the adobe quarters of the ranch help and talked with the men, finding them still bearing the weapons he had sent to them. He asked them to keep at least one watchman on post during the night, warning them that Torres and his band might sneak back. Complimenting them on their help in cowing the Torres gunmen, he returned through the kitchen and went with Jerry to the dining room.

Raquel de Aragon was there, supervising the final setting of the table and the placing of chairs. She was dressed in a high-waisted, white silk dress with a short train. The expensively made dress, latest fashion for very young women in New Orleans society of the past season, was trimmed in dark blue streamers from the sides and back, with a wide, dark blue collar piece over which was a filmy, fine white lace. In her lustrous dark hair a jewelled Spanish comb sparkled. Her lovely face had more color now, when she smiled greetings to her two guests, than was there when Dave had last seen her. Jerry Hope, unconscious of his gaping mouth, stood appalled by her beauty. Dave hurried to her, asking how she felt now, his eyes aglow with admiration.

"Oh, I'm all right," she assured him. "That was the first time I ever fainted. I have had so much trouble and worry lately that I have not eaten enough, which must have weakened me. Now I am so happy that my appetite has returned quite to normal. I did not eat the food sent to my room this evening, so if you and your friend will forgive me for taking a share of your food, I will eat supper with you. May I?"

She smiled across at gawking, lanky Jerry Hope. Dave started to express his own pleasure at having her partake with them of the meal, but glanced at his friend as he was about to speak. He had to stop

and restrain his laughter. Jerry Hope gulped, his Adam's apple racing up and down his long throat. Finally the freckled cowboy raised a hand to his bandaged head in an unconscious gesture and spoke his mind.

"Gosh, Miss, I was awful hungry a minute ago, but now I ain't," he confessed without taking his feasting eyes off the girl. "Gee whiz, Dave, I sure didn't notice up there in the mount'ns t'other day that she was so all-over pretty, or I'd a kilt about a dozen more devils for her. In all my born days, I ain't seen nobody so beautiful pretty!"

"Hey, wake up, you braying mule, and eat your oats," Dave called across the table to his helpless partner, laughing.

Dave saw the deep flush on Raquel's cheeks and knew that she was not accustomed to such staring, openly expressed admiration from rough men, even of Jerry's open-hearted, sincere kind. He quickly stepped to the chair at the head of the table and held it for her. As there were only three places set and three chairs, he surmised that they would be the only diners. He took the chair at Raquel's right and Jerry sat down awkwardly at her left.

"Where is Don Alfredo?" Dave asked Raquel.

"I suppose he ate at the regular supper time with those others," she replied. "I have not seen him since I came down."

She gazed into Dave's eyes as she spoke, a slumbering fear in her troubled expression. He did not want anything to spoil the moment for her. In a few moments he had the conversation turned upon her life in New Orleans. He and Jerry surprised her with their reminiscences of the city, where they had once gone with a boat-load of southwest Texans' longhorns.

Jerry recovered his appetite with great gusto. Raquel ate heartily and seemed to enjoy the company of her two guests as much as if they had been cavaliers with golden swords and fine velvets instead of the plainly garbed cowboys they were. For that short hour the three young people forgot the shadows hanging over Rancho Bonita, or they joined in mute consent to drive the thought away. They lived in perilous times when people snatched their pleasures when offered, grateful for every such moment that came their way.

The meal was finished and Raquel de Aragon led her guests into the big reception room. Alfredo de Aragon arose from a high-backed chair as they entered and gravely bowed. His revolver was still at his left hip. His face was an expressionless masque as he scarcely glanced toward the young men before addressing the girl.

"Our guests must be very tired and in need of rest, my dear," he said, "and you must be in need of real rest, yourself. I suggest that we all retire at once. I have had the guest room there prepared for the gentlemen."

He motioned toward double doors in the west end of the reception salon.

Raquel said nothing, but there was fear in her eyes. Jerry Hope voiced his full agreement, declaring that his idea of Heaven right then was a big, soft bed with no call to answer until he waked of his own accord. Then Jerry noticed the darkly disapproving look in Dave Warner's eyes and shut up, abashed, looking suspiciously in a side glance at de Aragon. The latter asked the Texans to follow him to their quarters and started to the west end of the room.

Jerry followed uncertainly, looking back for Dave.

The latter lingered with Raquel, held by her whispered words.

"Dave," she said, her hands upon his shoulders as she looked longingly up into his face, that dark worry again in her eyes, "please be on your guard tonight. I fear Uncle Alfredo, but I cannot make up my mind to ask you to imprison him. He may be truly glad that Torres has at last been driven away and his strange manner may be caused by my promising to marry you, an American, he dislikes Americans so much. He is my father's only brother and I dread making any mistake that might hurt him if he is innocent of any further plotting against us."

She dropped her gaze from his face, tears in her eyes.

Dave put his left arm around her and with his right hand he lifted her chin to look with a serious, questioning gaze into her glistening tear-filled eyes.

"Sweetheart," he began, "I wouldn't hurt you or any one dear to you for anything in the world, but if your safety and happiness and our lives are threatened and your uncle is killed in the shuffle, would that separate us? Would it put a wall between us that I could never break down?"

She seemed startled and deeply pained, but she did not flinch from him. Instead she looked bravely at him for a moment before speaking, thinking over the full import of his question.

"I can only pray to God that we be spared from that awful happening," she finally said, her lips quivering, her words coming with unsteady effort, "but whatever happens, Dave, you are more to me than anybody else in the world. It seems like I must be a foolish girl

to say that after knowing you little more than one day, but in that one day I have lived years of my life and it seems that I have known you for ages. You are so strong and so wonderful, Dave—I love you!"

She had suddenly buried her face against his chest, smothering her last words so that he understood them only because of a lover's keen ears. He held her close for a moment, kissing her perfumed hair, patting her slender back softly, lovingly with one hand.

"If the worst comes, sweetheart," he whispered down at her ear, "you have my promise that I won't put his blood on my hands unless it is the last thing to be done for yours and my sakes. If you should die, he would be owner of the Aragon grant, wouldn't he?"

She shuddered and drew back from him, looking beyond to the end of the room.

"Oh, darling, please don't," she murmured. "He is waiting for you. I will go to my room now. Please be sure your doors are locked and the windows fastened well inside. Good night."

She started to go. He called to her.

"Wait, Raquel," he said and stepped after her, "here, take your door key. I took it from your uncle. Use it on that door. Good night, precious girl."

He handed her the key and let her go, aware that she was embarrassed by the cold, staring watchfulness of her uncle. Dave turned and went toward de Aragon, who stood with folded arms at the opened double doors of the guest room, waiting like a carved statue. De Aragon nodded, indicating that Dave enter the room. There was a two-pronged candleholder burning on a dresser in the big room. Jerry Hope was feeling of the billowy bedding on a highpostered bedstead which was placed next to the north center wall.

Dave entered the room, keeping an eye furtively on de Aragon as the latter took a step into the doorway and halted. A swift glance revealed four high, narrow windows, two on the south side of the room and two at the west end. Long, draping plush curtains completely hid the windows and likewise cut off view of the inside from the outside.

"You will find water in the pitcher on the water stand and a wash basin, with towels there," de Aragon explained. "A lead-lined bathtub is behind the curtain in the corner and is full of water if you wish to bathe. I wish you a restful night of sleep. Good night."

"Hold on a minute, Don Alfredo," Dave called, stepping to the doors.

He pulled the two doors nearly shut, examining them for means of fastening. They were made of heavy panels, but had no locks. Dave quickly perceived that there were brackets on the inside of the doors plainly meant to hold a drop bar which would quite effectively lock the doors against the outside. But there was no drop bar in sight. He threw the doors half way back and faced the waiting, imperturbable de Aragon.

"Where's the bar that fastens the door, Don Alfredo?" he asked, looking sharply at the older man.

De Aragon's face did not change a line of its fixed, cold expression as he answered.

"It has not been used for years," he said. "I suspect that it has been burned as firewood by the servants long ago. You may feel perfectly safe in the room. I shall personally remain awake tonight in a vigilant watch. If you hear me walking in the yard outside your windows, accept that as proof that everything is secure. Good night, *señor.*"

He turned abruptly and walked away into the dining room while Dave Warner's eyes bored at his back, wonderingly.

When Dave turned back into the room and closed the doors, Jerry came over to him. Dave examined the doors and found that there were marks behind the bar racks indicating that a bar had certainly lain in those racks much more recently than indicated by de Aragon's assertion.

"Ain't there no way to fasten 'em tight?" Jerry asked.

"Not unless we shove our bed over here against 'em," Dave declared.

"The bed's fastened to the floor over there," Jerry replied. "We cain't budge it."

"Then I'll put a pillow down here and sleep across this door crack," Dave promised. "Let's have a look at the windows."

They went to the first window on the south side of the room and found that it had no glass in it. There were iron bars on the outside as there had been on Raquel's room the night before when Dave went up there, but the lock hooks had been removed. Dave brought the candles and made a close examination, finding unmistakable signs that the lock hooks had very recently been removed. He went from window to window and found the same result at each one.

"That shows pretty well what Mr. Alfredo was doing away from us so long tonight," Dave said, his jaws tight and grim. "We better

not shut all our eyes at once tonight, Jerry."

"Must be somethin' skunky on the wind, all right," Jerry declared gloomily. "And I sure did want a whole wagon load o' shut-eye on that fine bed. I ain't never had no chance to snooze in such a royal bug nest."

"We had a pretty fair sleep last night," Dave said, "and if we get a half night apiece tonight, we'll be lucky. You lie down on the bed and snooze with your boots and clothes on and your guns handy. About half through the night I'll wake you up and let you stand the last watch. Agreed?"

"Sure," Jerry agreed, starting toward the bed. "Suits me fine, but if a battle starts, don't forget to call me," he added.

"I'll dump the water pitcher on your funny face, you sleepyhead," Dave promised.

Jerry stretched out on the bed with his guns on, grumbling because of their discomfort, but in a minute he was sound asleep. Dave blew out the candles and sat down in a chair to wait and listen.

After a half hour of silent watchfulness, interrupted only by the faintest murmur of voices now and then from the rear patio, Dave felt drowsiness creeping irresistibly upon him. Fearing that he would fall asleep in spite of all efforts to resist, he stood up and began a slow, noiseless march, back and forth across the room.

He wondered if Raquel was sleeping, undisturbed by worry or worse dangers. Very much he wished that he could go to her room and assure himself that she was all right. His last remark to her had seemed such a shock to the girl that it was fixed more firmly in his mind now. He wondered if it were not quite likely that Alfredo de Aragon would wish Raquel dead and out of his way to the claim of the wide Aragon acres. Maybe that would be the scheming uncle's plan. Maybe he was even now executing that plan while Dave and Jerry remained here undisturbed.

He walked back and forth several times, tiptoeing, mulling over that troublesome thought. He could find no solace to his worry. Finally, when Jerry had been asleep more than an hour, Dave silently opened the double doors, went through and pulled them to after him. He would make sure that Raquel's room was undisturbed, then come back without waking Jerry from his blissful sleep.

The reception room was pitchy dark, but Dave found his way across its length without stumbling over furniture. He went slowly, his boots making the slightest scratching sound on the flagstone floor.

Up the stairs he went as carefully, feeling his way around the walls and down the hallway to Raquel's room. He listened long and intently with his ear against her door. He tried the door and found it locked, felt easier about her safety and turned to retrace his steps.

Back in the lower hallway, Dave fell to wondering about the night guard he had asked the peon help to establish now that de Aragon had set himself up as night watchman. Would de Aragon have countermanded his order? Uneasy with the thought, he started back along the hallway, tip-toeing, going to the adobes to investigate. He went out across the patio. No one was stirring out around the adobe huts of the peons.

He came near to the center of the long, many-doored large adobe, in which several of the retainer families had no doubt once been housed during more prosperous days on Rancho Bonita. He listened close to the screening blanket hanging across a doorway. A low murmur of voices sounded within. He called lightly.

"Si, señor!" a startled voice replied cautiously and was followed instantly by patter and slithering of bare feet on hard earthen floor.

A dark head peered out from the edge of the blanket and a man's fearful voice spoke in a whisper.

"Señor," the man said, "the Don Alfredo make us all go to bed, say we must sleep to work tomorrow. He say he will keep the watch. He make Pedro, that was to keep the first watch, come to bed. He was very angry that we listen to you and put out one to keep watch. I want to come and tell you, *señor,* but Don Alfredo threaten us with his gun."

"Haven't you guns?" Dave asked, anger rising in him, spurred on by an avalanche of premonitions and forebodings. "Why didn't you— Oh, hell!"

He started away, intent on reaching his room and Jerry Hope as quickly as possible, then he would find Alfredó de Aragon and have it out with the sly little man. The peon halted him.

"Señor," he cried low after Dave, "we have no guns and no knives. The Don Alfredo was very angry because we have guns and fighting knives. He say it never permitted on Rancho Bonita that the working help should have such. He threaten us with his gun and take our guns and knives which you have given to us. He is master. We could not disobey."

"You bellering, skeered sheep!" Dave exclaimed in English, furious and wildly apprehensive as he rushed away, running for the house.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As Dave ran toward the veranda he caught a fleeting glimpse of something moving across the yard from the tree he had used the night before. He ran out beyond the back end of the house's east section just in time to see two hurrying figures disappear around the front corner.

For a half second he was on the verge of rushing on to the front to challenge those night prowlers, then knew that his most urgent course should take him back to Jerry Hope as quickly as he could get there. He ran along the veranda and into the impenetrable darkness of the hallway. At each step he imagined that he could see lurking enemies ahead and to right and left.

He had just passed the stairway, going on toward the door to the big living room when he heard a loud screeching yell from Jerry Hope. Leaping across the reception room, Dave crashed into a long settee and knocked it over, creating a loud clatter on the hard flooring. He lunged in through the double doors to his room just when Jerry Hope yelled his name in great terror, asking where he was.

Dave fell aside inside the doors, over to the right and dropped to one knee, bending his body low until he could find out what troubled Jerry. He had both guns drawn and ready. He started to ask Jerry what caused his outcries, but his question froze on his lips as he heard a vicious snarl and whine from the far corner of the room, near one of the west windows. Jerry Hope, crouching on the front side of the bed, let out another howl of terror.

"Dave!" he cried. "Is that you come in the door? Fer Gawd's sake, do something! A panther, or somethin's jest busted in that window over there! He's gittin' ready to jump us! Dave, is that you?"

"Yeah," Dave answered in a tone just loud enough for Jerry to hear. "Keep quiet, Jerry! Somebody's outside—several of 'em. They put that panther in. It must be Raquel's pet that they been starving to make him wild. Everything's gone wrong. We gotta fight, Jerry! Get your readies on you!"

They listened a little while. Dave eased over to Jerry. A small lapping sound, like a big cat drinking water, came to their ears. Dave located the sound as coming from the northwest corner of the room,

where a curtain shut off the bath tub of which de Aragon had spoken. Then Dave was sure.

"That's Raquel's *Panterito,* all right," he said. "They've starved him for water and food and he's lapping it up from the bath tub. It's lucky I didn't throw out my emergency rations of jerked venison. I'm gonna risk giving the venison to the big cat."

"Good jumpin' Jupiter!" Jerry cried tensely, grasping Dave's shoulder. "Don't go near the varmint, pardner. He'll tear you to pieces!"

"I think he'll remember me—I made friends with him in Raquel's room," Dave said. "We're gonna be in a hell-blazing fight in about two shakes and we can't have this cat snarling around here in case we have to stumble over him. Old Alfredo has sneaked in his pal, Torres. He took all the guns and knives away from the ranch hands. We'll have to fight it out by ourselves."

He started creeping around the bed toward the continuing sound of the drinking cat. Jerry moaned, remaining still. Half way across the floor, Dave called easily, *"Panterito!"* He had taken out his flattened oilcloth package of jerked venison and now cast a piece of the dried meat toward the corner at the spot he estimated the big mountain cat would be while drinking.

There was an instant snarl and sudden small scratching of claws on the hard floor. Then Dave heard the sound of hungry chewing and mouthing over the piece of meat. He tossed another piece of the meat and again called, *"Panterito!"* There was no more snarling. He waited patiently, holding his breath, not knowing if the hunger-crazed beast would regard him as friend or enemy. He could only hope that the panther would remember the smell of him from the night before. Then he saw the gleam of golden yellow orbs suddenly bearing upon him in the dark. He held out some of the meat and again called the animal's pet name.

Slowly, as if very cautiously and fearfully, those glowing yellow eyes came toward him. He tossed another piece of meat to the nose of the animal when the shining eyes seemed to have crossed half the way to him. He saw the eyes disappear a second while the beast picked up the meat, then they flickered while the meat was chewed for a little while and swallowed. Dave wondered if their enemies were at that moment listening outside the windows, waiting for the death struggle within, or puzzling over what had happened after Jerry's first wild shouts of terror.

He emptied his supply of venison on the floor in front of him and waited after calling the panther again. He would gamble on the chance that Raquel's pet would recognized him and be appeased by the gift of food. The flowing eyes came on toward him faster then and bent down, disappearing at the heap of the dried meat two feet in front of Dave. He waited patiently while the dangerous beast of prey mouthed over the meat, eating it. After two or three minutes it seemed to have finished the last bite. Dave murmured its name again and kept repeating it, with his hand half extended.

Suddenly he saw the eyes open glowingly just before him and felt warm breath on his hand. With a supreme effort, he withstood the impulse to jerk his hand back. All the time, in his left hand, hidden behind his bent leg as he stooped there on one knee, his left-hand gun was ready in case the pet animal should have been turned into a ravenous, wild beast again by its sufferings.

The hot breath on his hand told him that *Panterito* was sniffing at him and locating his familiar smell. He remembered that Raquel had advised him to scratch the beast on the top of his head. He tentatively extended his hand and touched the furry neck. The panther only slightly turned his head and hot breath stirred on Dave's wrist as he slipped his hand on to the furry head and gently scratched the crown. Slowly the head lowered, as if in pleasure. Dave patted the neck and stood up. He caught the furry, loose skin on the neck and said, "Come, *Panterito,*" first in English, then in Spanish—for he did not know which language Raquel had used in training her pet—and started to lead the panther around the bed.

Slowly at first, then more easily and obediently the lithe, silently moving animal followed Dave to the doorway. There Dave pointed in the darkness across the reception salon and said, "Go to Raquel, *Panterito!* Go to Raquel!" He stepped back and shut the doors behind the panther.

"Whew!" Dave exhaled his breath in tremendous relief and hurried to Jerry Hope.

Jerry was waiting in silence beside the bed, unable to see what was going on, only assured by the slight sounds as he heard that Dave was considerably less than torn to pieces by the beast. He whispered Dave's name inquiringly as Dave came near him.

"Yes, it's me, Jerry," Dave told him in a whisper. "I got the panther outside. He'll go to Raquel. We're clear of him under our feet now. We gotta peek out them windows and see if them that

dumped the panther in through that window are out there waiting to hear us torn up."

"I bet they're on a sharp edge waitin' this long," Jerry declared. "Which way?"

"You take a peek out them south windows," Dave directed, "and I'll slip up on the west windows. If this winds up in a battle inside the dark house, let's yell one another's name every little bit to locate us, then jump to the right soon's we do."

"All right—the old rule," Jerry agreed.

They separated, Dave tip-toeing as fast as he could to the west end without making telltale pecking on the hard floor with his boots. He reached the south window at the west end. Laying himself against the right side windowfacing, he very slowly lifted the side of the plush curtain and peered through the iron bars. The outside seemed quite light after the total blackness within. The stars filled the yard with a gray, misty light that was sufficient to outline any human figures.

There was no object within his limited range of vision which could be a person. Some small shrubbery and weeds, or flowers were all that he saw. He leaned into the deep window and took in more territory. Still nothing. He slowly, easily shoved the iron barred protector outward, leaning farther out to scan the ground nearer to the walls.

All at once the earth underneath the window seemed to come alive. Two figures leaped out from the darkened wall of the house there, shouting one wild cry of terror or warning to some one else. They were gone into the darkness around toward the north end of the house before Dave could get his gun through the window and shove the bars on outward enough to shoot. More running men leaped away from the next window, nearer the north wall, the one through which the panther had evidently been shoved while safely bound, his thongs cut or loosened after he had been put through.

Dave saw these two last leaping forms clearly for a space of two seconds as they dashed across the gray wall of a short extension in the house structure there. He fired quickly at one running figure and heard the immediate cry that choked off with a thud of the body on the hard ground.

"I'm going out after 'em, Jerry!" he called back in a low, tense voice to his friend, then sprang into the window and leaped out to the ground.

He sped toward the jutting corner of the house wall and stumbled over the body of the prostrate man, slammed into the wall corner and lifted his gun hurriedly as he saw the three other runners, fleeing like dancing phantoms, half way to the far north end of the kitchen extension. He thumbed five shots as quickly as he could manipulate the hammer of his gun. He thought at least one of the runners plunged to the ground. Sticking close to the wall, he ran forward. After a few steps he dropped to the ground on his knees and drew out the empty cylinder, quickly replacing it with a full one from his vest pocket.

With two fully loaded guns in his hands, he arose and went running, stooped over, along the darkened side of the wall. He came to a man lying on the ground, writhing and twisting in agony, moaning in low, straining tones. Dave ran on, unable to stop now to help a suffering enemy. He stumbled and fell headlong when one foot caught against something soft upon the ground.

He picked himself up and stooped to hastily examine that which had tripped him. It was the still body of a man. Two of his shots had found targets. The hats hanging to the heads of the two men by their chin straps told him that they were of the big-hatted Torres band.

He went more cautiously to the north end of the kitchen, finding no other fallen enemy, wondering now if one of those men he had downed was Pancho Torres. He fervently hoped so. Then he decided that since Alfredo de Aragon had been the one to let these killers come in with the panther, de Aragon and Torres would most likely be together.

What devilment could they be up to, if they were not waiting to hear him and Jerry killed by the panther as these men had been doing? He thought immediately of Raquel as the answer. He was turning the corner of the kitchen and now sped across to the darker ground of the interior patio. He had accounted for three of the Torres band, but counting de Aragon, who would be at least a poor fighter for Torres now, there would be six men left in the darkness here somewhere, waiting to pick him and Jerry off.

He darted in to the right, springing upon the veranda which followed the patio side of the kitchen on to the turn eastward at the main wall of the house. A gun roared within the close interior of the house, apparently in the reception salon. There were cries of surprise from more than one throat and then running feet. Another

shot and then another; men stumbling over objects, banging furniture across the floor.

Dave ran forward, certain that Jerry Hope was tangling in close with their enemies inside the house. Torres and de Aragon would be there. Probably they had followed him when he had run through that big room, going back to Jerry fifteen minutes ago.

A form darted out of the dining room door onto the veranda just as another thunderous shot poured out inside the house. Dave was coming then to the turn of the veranda. He cried Jerry's name, then quickly dodged into the dark corner where the kitchen wall met the main house wall.

He watched the man ahead of him flatten against the wall beyond the dining room door. Holding himself very still, giving a moment for Jerry to answer if that should be he, Dave heard the click of a gun hammer as it was cocked. He waited no longer. The long, black powder flame from his gun almost mixed with the flame from that other gun. As he fired, Dave was dropping to one knee. A bullet snatched with numbing force at his right shoulder, between neck and shoulder bone. In a second, fire seemed to burn him there and his shirt was becoming moist against his skin.

Slinging his right arm, he convinced himself that the bullet had not cut vital muscles or bones. The man who had shot him fell outward from the wall to the veranda floor as Dave felt the deadening kick in his shoulder. If Dave had not dropped downward in the instant he did, that bullet would have killed him.

The young Texan, worried now over two maddening problems, slid forward along the wall to the dining room door and leaped across it. He wanted to ascertain as quickly as possible if Raquel was safe and he wanted very much to hear the gladdening voice of Jerry Hope. He lay leached against the wall near the door, debating whether to enter the house through the dining room, or go on to the dark hallway. In either case he might come upon enemies in the dark and be in doubt as to whether they were Jerry Hope. As yet he had not heard Jerry call his name, the signal they had agreed upon. This set him into a frenzy of suspense. Jerry was either dead, or so hard pressed that he dared not call Dave's name.

While mulling over his problem, his eyes fell upon the outstretched figure of the man he had killed, lying there almost touching his feet. The filtering gray light of the moon just then lifting its yellow ball over the eastern mountains, revealed something familiar

about the diminutive figure. Dave stooped and looked more closely. He felt of the dark, rich clothing on the man and then straightened up, a cold, clammy feeling in his hands. A sudden sensation of revulsion spread through his whole being. He had killed Raquel's uncle, her last flesh and blood kin!

Fleeing from the dead behind him, intent upon finding his enemies, Dave hurried along the veranda toward the hallway that would lead him nearer to Raquel. In this supreme moment of danger, he thought of the girl with pity and fortified himself with a determination to win this fight for her and be in the future all and more to her than this traitorous uncle could have been had he not been the weakling that he was.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE WOUND in Dave Warner's shoulder was steadily bleeding. His whole right side was now wet, his shirt clamming to his skin. It worried him. He could not stop to try and staunch the flow and he feared that the loss of blood would soon begin to weaken him.

He knew that while some of the Torres killers were fighting him and Jerry here below, Pancho Torres, crazed by his lustful infatuation for beautiful Raquel de Aragon, would be intent upon assuring himself possession of the girl. With this fear driving him, he slipped into the long hallway leading from the east veranda to the front.

Holding close to the right hand wall, he edged along toward the stairs. Silence had settled over the house like the midnight quiet in a cemetery. Men must be waiting somewhere, tensed and ready to kill, waiting for an enemy to show his location. If Jerry Hope would only make some outcry, locate himself by some means! Or perhaps the fighting, grumbling cowboy—. He forced himself to quit thinking of such a possible calamity.

His right hand, feeling ahead of him in his slow progress, felt the corner of the wall at the stair landing. He heard the faintest scratch of something behind him as if a boot sole slipped along the stone flagging of the veranda. Moving as quickly as he could without noisy footsteps, he slipped around the wall corner and stepped upon the lowest stair. Standing there, he turned to watch for movement between himself and the dim gray light of the patio. Suddenly a voice startled him, crying out from back there close to the rear end of the hallway.

"Guardase, Pancho!" a man cried. "Look out, Pancho! He comes now against you by the stairs!"

So, Dave thought, Pancho Torres was near, perhaps up these stairs now, seeking entrance to Raquel's room to take her! How else would that Torres henchman know that his chief was up those stairs unless the fellow had known that Torres was after Raquel?

Dave stood for a few ticking seconds, breathing short, soundless breaths, wondering how near Torres would be there before him. He did not want to leave any killer on his back trail and be caught between two fires, yet if he went back now after that man outside, Torres might reach Raquel's room in the meantime and—

"Bam-m-m! Bam-m-m!" two quick shots roared in quick succession out there in the front end of the patio, or on the veranda in the direction of the dining room door, cutting off Dave's meditation with a shock.

A man's half made cry of pain from there at the back end of the hallway drew the quietly waiting youth's quick glance around the corner of the stair wall. That cry was cut off so abruptly that there could be but one explanation and that was given Dave as he saw a man dash out into view on the veranda, going three steps before he collapsed, falling face downward.

Jerry Hope was still alive and stalking their enemies! Dave knew that no one else around Rancho Bonita could have thumbed that gun so fast, or planted his bullets with such deadly aim.

Immensely relieved, Dave started feeling his way upward, step by step, very slowly. With Jerry behind him, out of danger of crossing lead with him by error in this thick pall of darkness, he could go onward in the search for his chief enemy with more courage.

He wondered what had become of the pet panther. It was surprising to him that the beast had not been heard from in a raging attack upon the creeping killers in the house. There could be only one of two explanations of that mystery: Either some of that earlier shooting inside had killed the animal, or it had gone immediately after its release from his and Jerry's bedroom to Raquel's door and begged admittance by scratching and whining.

On finally reaching the halfway turn of the stairs, Dave let himself down to hands and knees. Crawling thus, he would make less of a target for bullets drawn by any slight noise he might make. He had both of his guns in his hands, holding them upward, walking on the outside balls of his fists. While he edged upward he counted over in his mind the possible remainder of Torres' killers.

He had done for three outside and Jerry had certainly accounted for one more down there a minute ago. Possibly four remained, counting Torres, if Jerry had not finished one or more inside during the first outburst of shots there. Or could Torres have gathered more men during his short stay away from the rancho?

After each short move upward, Dave waited, perfectly still, trying both his senses of hearing and feeling, feeling not with his hands, but with that delicate sensory mechanism which enables those with long training in alertness to become conscious of another living body nearby in the darkness.

He had reached what he believed would be the last step before the top of the stairs, still going as noiselessly as a cat creeping upon its prey. Something strangely electric crept over him then while he hesitated before reaching upward again. There was a pulsing, living something only inches before his face! Could it be Torres, having heard his man's warning, waiting here for him at the head of the stairs?

With bated breath, Dave pointed a gun upward, toward where the body of a man would be who stood against the wall corner above him. Then he hesitated, knowing that the cocking of his gun hammer would expose him. To prevent this he would only draw the hammer back nearly to the point where the catch spring would drop, then release the hammer, hoping that this would explode the cap.

A terrified scream inside Raquel's room chilled Dave's blood as his thumb pulled the hammer slowly back. In his quick surge of surprise, he flipped the hammer to the cocking point and as a blinding flash and thunderous roar broke just above him, his finger pressed trigger, releasing a bullet blindly at the bulk revealed in that spinning second of lightning.

Dave heard the loud thump of the bullet that had been fired downward at him as it burrowed into the stair step near his face, but an instant afterward he sprang aside, bumping against the opposite railing. Another painfully blinding flash burst right before him. The world suddenly twisted about him. An earthquake seemed to lift up the stairs under him and smash his face. He heard his guns clack on the steps, felt his body meeting those steps, heard running feet going swiftly away.

He was not unconscious, but vaguely realized his situation, remembering that he must stop those who now brought terror to Raquel de Aragon. She was still screaming inside her room. Paralysis had momentarily made him helpless, yet he could feel no wound. He tried to lift himself, felt his hands clenching guns. Slowly he dragged himself into the hallway and knew that a heavy body was lunging smashingly against Raquel's room door.

That would be he who had shot him and thought him dead. Whatever had happened in Raquel's room had drawn the man away before he could make sure of Dave's death. The youth knew this now and lifted himself to his feet, more keenly aware of everything, determined to get nearer and plant lead in him who was battering at the girl's door.

His neck burned strangely at the back of his head, just at the edge of his hair, and fresh blood trickled down his spine that could not be from his shoulder wound. He lifted a hand to investigate and found a stinging gash at the base of his skull. The bullet had cut close to vital nerves, shocking them into momentary paralysis, but by a hair's breadth had missed bringing instant death.

He lunged onward now with greater strength trickling into his muscles. He was nearly to Raquel's door. Some one in the room was having a desperate struggle, for a voice came now in gasps as if a man fought for his life. Suddenly came the loud splintering crash of wood giving way and light filtered into the darkened hallway. Dave saw the big body of a man crowding hastily through the smashed panelling of the door and at the same instant he heard a snarling, vicious growl that was half whine, muffled as if the beast that emitted it were suddenly burying its fangs into something.

More rapidly and surely now Dave stepped before the stream of light that came through the demolished center of the door. He saw Raquel de Aragon standing, half bent over, beside her bed, one hand reaching blindly behind her for the support of the bed while her other hand was pressed to her mouth. Her eyes stared widely in unmistakable horror at something across the room.

Dave slipped through the broken door and saw the large shape of Pancho Torres a few steps away, back of him, lifting his gun. On beyond the big man was a sight that would have horrified a more hardened person than Raquel de Aragon. The pet panther, as viciously raging now as any wild beast of the mountains, was doubled into a big, tawny knot over the weakly struggling body of a man, jaws clenched on the man's throat.

Dave had no time to stand in creepy fascination over the terrible scene, for Pancho Torres was aiming a big black gun for a dead shot at the faithful protector of Raquel.

"Pancho Torres!" the youth shouted, lifting his guns, aiming them both at the bandit leader.

Torres whirled, leaping with a speed surprising because of his big frame. The gun that had been aimed for a death shot at the panther was turning upon Dave Warner. Raquel de Aragon cried a needless warning at Dave just when his two gun barrels poured long tongues of flame. Pancho Torres bent in suddenly at the middle. His head slumped slowly forward; his outstretched gun hand wavered and fell to his side, dropping the gun to the floor. He staggered back-

ward a step, then crumpled to the floor, turned over in one convulsive movement onto his face and lay still.

There were cries outside Raquel's window then clearly audible for the first time, cries that Dave seemed to have heard there a moment before while he gambled for life. He hurried across the room and looked out below, into the bright light of the newly risen moon. A man was just dropping to the ground from a ladder which reached up to the sill of Raquel's window. That man had a gun lifted to shoot at something northward, along the wall of the house.

Dave heard a boy's voice in a challenging, defiant cry and saw the gleam of moonlight on a steel blade that flashed toward the man below; saw that man drop his gun, stagger backwards and clutch with both hands at the knife which pierced his chest. As he wavered there on his feet another gleaming blade sped with a speed barely visible and plunged into the man's throat. He fell over backwards upon the bare, hard ground.

Dave heard a familiar voice then and leaned farther out the window as a soft hand was laid upon his shoulder and Raquel de Aragon's agitated voice spoke close to him.

"Dave—Dave!" Raquel cried. "What is happening out there? Are there more of them? Dave! You have blood on you! You are hurt!"

He heard the snarl of the panther then and looked around to see the still maddened beast tearing at the flesh of the man he had killed. The sight sent cold shivers over him and he turned his attention back to the outside, anxious yet to know if the last of the Torres band had been accounted for. He spoke over his shoulder to Raquel, assuring her shortly that he was all right, then called to Jerry Hope who was running up to the boy, Jimmy, the knife wielder.

"I killed him!" the boy was telling Jerry. "I killed the he-goat who was on the ladder to steal the señorita from us!"

There was hysterical triumph in the boy's cry as he went on to tell Jerry how he had hidden the knives when Alfredo de Aragon had disarmed the others. Jerry and the youth were coming on under the window to the prostrate victim of the boy's knives, the boy's loud, excited talk drowning out Dave's first calls to Jerry.

"Jerry!" Dave called more loudly down to his friend. "Are there any more Torres devils left? How many did you get?"

Jerry shouted his joy at seeing his partner.

"I sure thought they'd got you inside," he went on. "I got the

skunk that hollered to old Torres about you comin' after 'im and I'd done for another'n inside. You think there's any more skulkin' 'round inside?"

"Nope," Dave told him, greatly relieved. "If you got two and that one done for there by that nervy lad, there won't be any more left, 'less Torres brought more back than he took away 'while ago. I guess there's no more, but there's ticklish work to be done up here. Get our lass ropes quick, Jerry, and come up to this room. Hurry as fast as you can!"

The long-legged cowboy left the Mexican boy gloating over his gory victory down there in the yard and ran without a word of questioning Dave's need of the ropes. Dave turned then to the trembling, agitated girl at his elbow and caught her in his arms. He leaned against the window-facing and held her so that she would not look upon the nauseating sight of her pet panther tearing at the flesh of his victim. He kissed her and pressed his hands over her ears to shut out the snarling sounds.

When Jerry Hope's pounding boots finally announced his approach along the upper hallway, Raquel, pressing her face against Dave's chest, asked him what he was going to do.

"I'm awfully sorry, sweetheart," he told her as softly as he could, "but you have lost your pet for good and all time. I knew once of a pet panther that had been raised from a kitten just like yours. It was plenty tame and petted and loved by the children of the family, but a drunk man tried to kill it one day and it killed that man. There was a trial. Some of the neighbors wanted the panther killed, but the children who had raised it as a pet begged so hard for their pet that they were allowed to keep it on condition that it be kept locked up. But that beast had gotten the taste of human blood and flesh. It wasn't the same afterwards and one day it jumped on one of the children and had it torn to pieces and was eating it before the child's father could kill it."

"What are you going to do with *Panterito?*" she asked, fear catching at her voice.

"Please don't ask me that, darling," he pleaded. "Only believe me when I say that I cannot take any chances on you ever being hurt, my little one."

Jerry Hope climbed through the broken door and stopped just inside, the coils of rope in his right hand, his eyes bulging in amazement at the scene he beheld. The hungry panther was still tearing at

human flesh, standing astride his victim.

"Toss me my lass rope, Jerry," Dave commanded.

The coil of rope was thrown across the wide room and Dave caught it, quickly playing it out. He made a loop, asking Jerry meanwhile to do the same with his. When both young men stood with their loops ready for casting, Dave gave the signal and they cast at the snarling beast's head as it tore a mouthful of flesh and drew back on its haunches.

The two lasso loops dropped neatly over the panther's head and with instantaneous, powerful jerks, each lasso thrower pulled the loops tight as the maddened man-killer sprang into the air, turning in a lightning whirl, trying to throw off the entangling, choking ropes, screaming in great fury.

"Open the door, Raquel," Dave ordered the frightened, sadly worried girl.

She ran to the splintered door with her key and got it open, then moved back to climb on her bed where she buried her face in pillows, refusing to watch while her beloved pet was dragged out.

Jerry followed Dave's instructions and backed out into the hall, dragging the raging beast in spite of its vicious struggles against the ropes. Dave kept a tight rope behind, holding the panther back from rushing upon Jerry Hope. With difficulty they maneuvered the animal down the darkened stairs and out into the patio. A gathering of frightened, jabbering peons out there looked upon the strange sight, fascinated. Dave spoke to them in a pause of his and Jerry's progress around the north end as they headed for the gate.

"You people get busy quickly," he told them. "Get the dead men out of the señorita's room and pick up all the other dead around the place. Stretch them out on the center veranda there and clean up all signs of the blood. And you two girls," he spoke directly to the fat waitress and her sister, "go to the señorita and help her now. *Andale!*"

The dusky rancho people seemed very glad to do Dave's bidding and scattered hastily to their tasks.

With the boy, Jimmy, holding the big north gate back on its hinges, Dave and Jerry maneuvered the panther outside and then took him on behind the horse corrals. There Dave had Jerry tie his rope to a fence post while he kept his own tightly drawn. The panther struggled less violently now and finally quieted down, lying flat on the ground as if ready to spring at the first opportunity.

"You do it, Jerry," Dave told his friend. "I haven't the heart. Get as close to him as you can and put a bullet through the burr of his ear. End him as quickly and merciful as you can."

"Good goshawmighty!" Jerry grumbled, but proceeded with quick dispatch to his grim task. His gun roared and kicked in his hand. The panther dropped his head flat on the ground and his tail wobbled feebly, beating at the ground. Jerry stepped closer and fired two more shots.

It was mid-morning of the second day afterwards when the black-robed padre arrived from the mission thirty miles down the valley. He performed the rites of the church over Don Alfredo de Aragon at the graveside in the little cemetery of Rancho Bonita and intoned prayers over the dead bandit leader and his followers.

In the afternoon of the same day the padre united Dave Warner and Raquel de Aragon in marriage, giving his ready approval to the necessary haste after the death of the bride's uncle, for twenty-year old Raquel de Aragon would need the strong arm of a protector, the good padre declared. And in her room a little later, happy Raquel Warner clung to her tall young husband's neck, careful not to press upon his wounds, and talked of her happiness.

"And do you believe in wise old Conchita's powers now, my big, handsome husband?" she asked, her dark eyes glittering with joy as she gazed up into his smiling, tanned face.

"Well," Dave replied, "all I'm sure of is that she picked you a mighty happy and mighty lucky husband that's gonna love you always and build Rancho Bonita into the biggest, finest ranch in this new American empire."

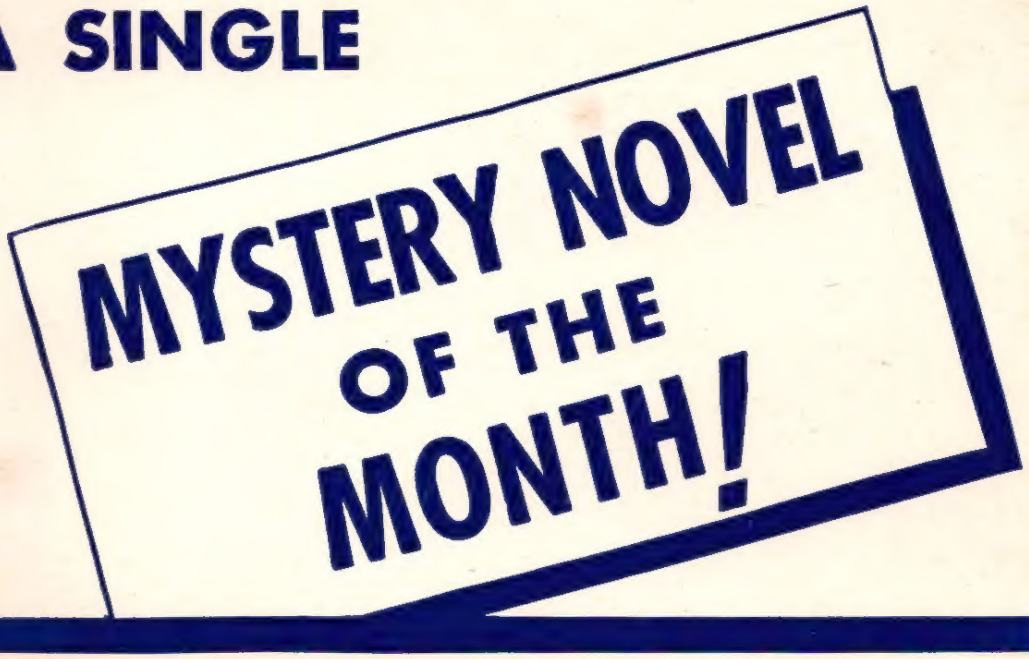
Jerry Hope had come to where some of the ranch people were beginning the marriage festival out in the open east yard. Standing under the window of the bridal room, Jerry shouted for Dave and his bride to hear, trying his best to sing:

"Oh, California and Sally Cornya,
"Your Little Davy Warner
"Got stuck in a corner
"One pretty bright day
"And he ain't never comin' your way!"

Dave listened to Jerry's crude effort and grinned happily as he held his bride more closely.

"Besides you, darling," he said, "I don't know anybody else in the world I'd rather have to help make Rancho Bonita into a grand little corner of Heaven than that pardner of mine. His poetry and singing may be pretty bad, but it sounds mighty good to me, 'cause it tells me he's gonna stick here with us and Rancho Bonita."

DON'T MISS A SINGLE



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